Weird Tales

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SHADOWS IN ZAMBOULA

stark horror in the sinister house of Aram Baksh

by

ROBERT E. HOWARD

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WEIRD TALES ISSUED 1st OF EACH MONTH

Shadows in Zamboula

By ROBERT E. HOWARD

A thrilling weird tale about Conan the barbarian adventurer, the sinister house of Aram Baksh, and the cobras that danced in the temple

1. *A Drum Begins*

"PERIL hides in the house of Aram Baksh!"

The speaker's voice quivered with earnestness and his lean, black-nailed fingers clawed at Conan's mightily-muscled arm as he croaked his warning. He was a wiry, sun-burnt man with a straggling black beard, and his ragged garments proclaimed him a nomad. He looked smaller and meaner than ever in contrast to the giant Cimmerian with his black brows, broad chest, and powerful limbs. They stood in a corner of the Sword-Makers' Bazar, and on either side of them flowed past the many-tongued, many-colored stream of the Zamboula streets, which is exotic, hybrid, flamboyant and clamorous.

Conan pulled his eyes back from following a bold-eyed, red-lipped Ghanara whose short slit skirt bared her brown thigh at each insolent step, and frowned down at his importunate companion.

"What do you mean by peril?" he demanded.

The desert man glanced furtively over his shoulder before replying, and lowered his voice.

"Who can say? But desert men and travelers *have* slept in the house of Aram Baksh, and never been seen or heard of again. What became of them? *He* swore they rose and went their way—and it is true that no citizen of the city has ever disappeared from his house. But no one saw the travelers again, and men say that goods and equipment recognized as theirs have been seen in the bazars. If Aram did not sell them, after doing away with their owners, how came they there?"

"I have no goods," growled the Cimmerian, touching the shagreen-bound hilt of the broadsword that hung at his hip. "I have even sold my horse."

"But it is not always rich strangers who vanish by night from the house of Aram Baksh!" chattered the Zuagir. "Nay, poor desert men have slept there—because his score is less than that of the other taverns—and have been seen no more. Once a chief of the Zuagirs whose son had thus vanished complained to the satrap, Jungir Khan, who ordered the house searched by soldiers."

"And they found a cellar full of corpses?" asked Conan in good-humored derision.

"Nay! They found naught! And drove the chief from the city with threats and curses! But"—he drew closer to Conan and shivered—"something else was found! At the edge of the desert, beyond the houses, there is a clump of palm-trees, and within that grove there is a pit. And within that pit have been found human bones, charred and blackened! Not once, but many times!"

"Which proves what?" grunted the Cimmerian.

"Aram Baksh is a demon! Nay, in this accursed city which Stygians built and which Hyrkanians rule—where white,

"It blotted out furniture, walls, and the smiling countenance of Baal-pteor."

brown and black folk mingle together to produce hybrids of all unholy hues and breeds—who can tell who is a man, and who a demon in disguise? Aram Baksh is a demon in the form of a man! At night he assumes his true guise and carries his guests off into the desert where his fellow demons from the waste meet in conclave."

"Why does he always carry off strangers?" asked Conan skeptically.

"The people of the city would not suffer him to slay their people, but they care naught for the strangers who fall into his hands. Conan, you are of the West, and know not the secrets of this ancient land. But, since the beginning of happenings, the demons of the desert have worshipped Yog, the Lord of the Empty Abodes, with fire—fire that devours human victims.

"Be warned! You have dwelt for many moons in the tents of the Zuagirs, and you are our brother! Go not to the house of Aram Baksh!"

"Get out of sight!" Conan said suddenly. "Yonder comes a squad of the

city-watch. If they see you they may remember a horse that was stolen from the satrap's stable——"

The Zuagir gasped, and moved convulsively. He ducked between a booth and a stone horse-trough, pausing only long enough to chatter: "Be warned, my brother! There are demons in the house of Aram Baksh!" Then he darted down a narrow alley and was gone.

CONAN shifted his broad sword-belt to his liking, and calmly returned the searching stares directed at him by the squad of watchmen as they swung past. They eyed him curiously and suspiciously, for he was a man who stood out even in such a motley throng as crowded the winding streets of Zamboula. His blue eyes and alien features distinguished him from the Eastern swarms, and the straight sword at his hip added point to the racial difference.

The watchmen did not accost him, but swung on down the street, while the crowd opened a lane for them. They were Pelishtim, squat, hook-nosed, with blue-black beards sweeping their mailed breasts —mercenaries hired for work the ruling Turanians considered beneath themselves, and no less hated by the mongrel population for that reason.

Conan glanced at the sun, just beginning to dip behind the flat-topped houses on the western side of the bazar, and hitching once more at his belt, moved off in the direction of Aram Baksh's tavern.

With a hillman's stride he moved through the ever-shifting colors of the streets, where the ragged tunics of whining beggars brushed against the ermine-trimmed khalats of lordly merchants, and the pearl-sewn satin of rich courtezans. Giant black slaves slouched along, jostling blue-bearded wanderers from the Shemitish cities, ragged nomads from the surrounding deserts, traders and adventurers from all the lands of the East.

The native population was no less heterogenous. Here, centuries ago, the armies of Stygia had come, carving an empire out of the eastern desert. Zamboula was but a small trading-town then, lying amidst a ring of oases, and inhabited by descendants of nomads. The Stygians built it into a city and settled it with their own people, and with Shemite and Kushite slaves. The ceaseless caravans, threading the desert from east to west and back again, brought riches and more mingling of races. Then came the conquering Turanians, riding out of the East to thrust back the boundaries of Stygia, and now for a generation Zamboula had been Turan's westernmost outpost, ruled by a Turanian satrap.

The babel of a myriad tongues smote on the Cimmerian's ears as the restless pattern of the Zamboula streets weaved about him—cleft now and then by a squad of clattering horsemen, the tall, supple warriors of Turan, with dark hawk-faces, clinking metal and curved swords. The throng scampered from under their horses' hoofs, for they were the lords of Zamboula. But tall, somber Stygians, standing back in the shadows, glowered darkly, remembering their ancient glories. The hybrid population cared little whether the king who controlled their destinies dwelt in dark Khemi or gleaming Aghrapur. Jungir Khan ruled Zamboula, and men whispered that Nafertari, the satrap's mistress, ruled Jungir Khan; but the people went their way, flaunting their myriad colors in the streets, bargaining, disputing, gambling, swilling, loving, as the people of Zamboula have done for all the centuries its towers and minarets have lifted over the sands of the Kharamun.

Bronze lanterns, carved with leering

dragons, had been lighted in the streets before Conan reached the house of Aram Baksh. The tavern was the last occupied house on the street, which ran west. A wide garden, enclosed by a wall, where date-palms grew thick, separated it from the houses farther east. To the west of the inn stood another grove of palms, through which the street, now become a road, wound out into the desert. Across the road from the tavern stood a row of deserted huts, shaded by straggling palm-trees, and occupied only by bats and jackals. As Conan came down the road he wondered why the beggars, so plentiful in Zamboula, had not appropriated these empty houses for sleeping-quarters. The lights ceased some distance behind him. Here were no lanterns, except the one hanging before the tavern gate: only the stars, the soft dust of the road underfoot, and the rustle of the palm-leaves in the desert breeze.

Aram's gate did not open upon the road, but upon the alley which ran between the tavern and the garden of the date-palms. Conan jerked lustily at the rope which depended from the bell beside the lantern, augmenting its clamor by hammering on the iron-bound teakwood gate with the hilt of his sword. A wicket opened in the gate and a black face peered through.

"Open, blast you," requested Conan. "I'm a guest. I've paid Aram for a room, and a room I'll have, by Crom!"

The black craned his neck to stare into the starlit road behind Conan; but he opened the gate without comment, and closed it again behind the Cimmerian, locking it and bolting it. The wall was unusually high; but there were many thieves in Zamboula, and a house on the edge of the desert might have to be defended against a nocturnal nomad raid. Conan strode through a garden where great pale blossoms nodded in the starlight, and entered the tap-room, where a Stygian with the shaven head of a student sat at a table brooding over nameless mysteries, and some nondescripts wrangled over a game of dice in a corner.

Aram Baksh came forward, walking softly, a portly man, with a black beard that swept his breast, a jutting hook-nose, and small black eyes which were never still.

"You wish food?" he asked. "Drink?"

"I ate a joint of beef and a loaf of bread in the *suk*," grunted Conan. "Bring me a tankard of Ghazan wine—I've got just enough left to pay for it." He tossed a copper coin on the wine-splashed board.

"You did not win at the gaming-tables?"

"How could I, with only a handful of silver to begin with? I paid you for the room this morning, because I knew I'd probably lose. I wanted to be sure I had a roof over my head tonight. I notice nobody sleeps in the streets in Zamboula. The very beggars hunt a niche they can barricade before dark. The city must be full of a particularly bloodthirsty brand of thieves."

He gulped the cheap wine with relish, and then followed Aram out of the tap-room. Behind him the players halted their game to stare after him with a cryptic speculation in their eyes. They said nothing, but the Stygian laughed, a ghastly laugh of inhuman cynicism and mockery. The others lowered their eyes uneasily, avoiding one another's glance. The arts studied by a Stygian scholar are not calculated to make him share the feelings of a normal human being.

Conan followed Aram down a corridor lighted by copper lamps, and it did not please him to note his host's noiseless tread. Aram's feet were clad in soft slippers and the hallway was carpeted with thick Turanian rugs; but there was an un-

pleasant suggestion of stealthiness about the Zamboulan.

At the end of the winding corridor Aram halted at a door, across which a heavy iron bar rested in powerful metal brackets. This Aram lifted and showed the Cimmerian into a well-appointed chamber, the windows of which, Conan instantly noted, were small and strongly set with twisted bars of iron, tastefully gilded. There were rugs on the floor, a couch, after the Eastern fashion, and ornately carven stools. It was a much more elaborate chamber than Conan could have procured for the price nearer the center of the city—a fact that had first attracted him, when, that morning, he discovered how slim a purse his roisterings for the past few days had left him. He had ridden into Zamboula from the desert a week before.

Aram had lighted a bronze lamp, and he now called Conan's attention to the two doors. Both were provided with heavy bolts.

"You may sleep safely tonight, Cimmerian," said Aram, blinking over his bushy beard from the inner doorway.

Conan grunted and tossed his naked broadsword on the couch.

"Your bolts and bars are strong; but I always sleep with steel by my side."

Aram made no reply; he stood fingering his thick beard for a moment as he stared at the grim weapon. Then silently he withdrew, closing the door behind him. Conan shot the bolt into place, crossed the room, opened the opposite door and looked out. The room was on the side of the house that faced the road running west from the city. The door opened into a small court that was enclosed by a wall of its own. The end-walls, which shut it off from the rest of the tavern compound, were high and without entrances; but the wall that flanked the road was low, and there was no lock on the gate.

Conan stood for a moment in the door, the glow of the bronze lamp behind him, looking down the road to where it vanished among the dense palms. Their leaves rustled together in the faint breeze; beyond them lay the naked desert. Far up the street, in the other direction, lights gleamed and the noises of the city came faintly to him. Here was only starlight, the whispering of the palm-leaves, and beyond that low wall, the dust of the road and the deserted huts thrusting their flat roofs against the low stars. Somewhere beyond the palm groves a drum began.

The garbled warnings of the Zuagir returned to him, seeming somehow less fantastic than they had seemed in the crowded, sunlit streets. He wondered again at the riddle of those empty huts. Why did the beggars shun them? He turned back into the chamber, shut the door and bolted it.

The light began to flicker, and he investigated, swearing when he found the palm-oil in the lamp was almost exhausted. He started to shout for Aram, then shrugged his shoulders and blew out the light. In the soft darkness he stretched himself fully clad on the couch, his sinewy hand by instinct searching for and closing on the hilt of his broadsword. Glancing idly at the stars framed in the barred windows, with the murmur of the breeze through the palms in his ears, he sank into slumber with a vague consciousness of the muttering drum, out on the desert —the low rumble and mutter of a leather-covered drum, beaten with soft, rhythmic strokes of an open black hand. . . .

2. *The Night Skulkers*

It was the stealthy opening of a door which awakened the Cimmerian. He did not awake as civilized men do, drowsy and drugged and stupid. He awoke in-

stantly, with a clear mind, recognizing the sound that had interrupted his sleep. Lying there tensely in the dark he saw the outer door slowly open. In a widening crack of starlit sky he saw framed a great black bulk, broad, stooping shoulders and a misshapen head blocked out against the stars.

Conan felt the skin crawl between his shoulders. He had bolted that door securely. How could it be opening now, save by supernatural agency? And how could a human being possess a head like that outlined against the stars? All the tales he had heard in the Zuagir tents of devils and goblins came back to bead his flesh with clammy sweat. Now the monster slid noiselessly into the room, with a crouching posture and a shambling gait; and a familiar scent assailed the Cimmerian's nostrils, but did not reassure him, since Zuagir legendry represented demons as smelling like that.

Noiselessly Conan coiled his long legs under him; his naked sword was in his right hand, and when he struck it was as suddenly and murderously as a tiger lunging out of the dark. Not even a demon could have avoided that catapulting charge. His sword met and clove through flesh and bone, and something went heavily to the floor with a strangling cry. Conan crouched in the dark above it, sword dripping in his hand. Devil or beast or man, the thing was dead there on the floor. He sensed death as any wild thing senses it. He glared through the half-open door into the starlit court beyond. The gate stood open, but the court was empty.

Conan shut the door but did not bolt it. Groping in the darkness he found the lamp and lighted it. There was enough oil in it to burn for a minute or so. An instant later he was bending over the figure that sprawled on the floor in a pool of blood.

It was a gigantic black man, naked but for a loin-cloth. One hand still grasped a knotty-headed bludgeon. The fellow's kinky wool was built up into horn-like spindles with twigs and dried mud. This barbaric coiffure had given the head its misshapen appearance in the starlight. Provided with a clue to the riddle, Conan pushed back the thick red lips, and grunted as he stared down at teeth filed to points.

He understood now the mystery of the strangers who had disappeared from the house of Aram Baksh; the riddle of the black drum thrumming out there beyond the palm groves, and of that pit of charred bones—that pit where strange meat might be roasted under the stars, while black beasts squatted about to glut a hideous hunger. The man on the floor was a cannibal slave from Darfar.

There were many of his kind in the city. Cannibalism was not tolerated openly in Zamboula. But Conan knew now why people locked themselves in so securely at night, and why even beggars shunned the open alleys and doorless ruins. He grunted in disgust as he visualized brutish black shadows skulking up and down the nighted streets, seeking human prey—and such men as Aram Baksh to open the doors to them. The innkeeper was not a demon; he was worse. The slaves from Darfar were notorious thieves; there was no doubt that some of their pilfered loot found its way into the hands of Aram Baksh. And in return he sold them human flesh.

Conan blew out the light, stepped to the door and opened it, and ran his hand over the ornaments on the outer side. One of them was movable and worked the bolt inside. The room was a trap to catch human prey like rabbits. But this time instead of a rabbit it had caught a saber-toothed tiger.

Conan returned to the other door, lift-

ed the bolt and pressed against it. It was immovable and he remembered the bolt on the other side. Aram was taking no chances either with his victims or the men with whom he dealt. Buckling on his sword-belt, the Cimmerian strode out into the court, closing the door behind him. He had no intention of delaying the settlement of his reckoning with Aram Baksh. He wondered how many poor devils had been bludgeoned in their sleep and dragged out of that room and down the road that ran through the shadowed palm groves to the roasting-pit.

He halted in the court. The drum was still muttering, and he caught the reflection of a leaping red glare through the groves. Cannibalism was more than a perverted appetite with the black men of Darfar; it was an integral element of their ghastly cult. The black vultures were already in conclave. But whatever flesh filled their bellies that night, it would not be his.

To reach Aram Baksh he must climb one of the walls which separated the small enclosure from the main compound. They were high, meant to keep out the man-eaters; but Conan was no swamp-bred black man; his thews had been steeled in boyhood on the sheer cliffs of his native hills. He was standing at the foot of the nearer wall when a cry echoed under the trees.

In an instant Conan was crouching at the gate, glaring down the road. The sound had come from the shadows of the huts across the road. He heard a frantic choking and gurgling such as might result from a desperate attempt to shriek, with a black hand fastened over the victim's mouth. A close-knit clump of figures emerged from the shadows beyond the huts, and started down the road—three huge black men carrying a slender, struggling figure between them. Conan caught the glimmer of pale limbs writhing in the starlight, even as, with a convulsive wrench, the captive slipped from the grasp of the brutal fingers and came flying up the road, a supple young woman, naked as the day she was born. Conan saw her plainly before she ran out of the road and into the shadows between the huts. The blacks were at her heels, and back in the shadows the figures merged and an intolerable scream of anguish and horror rang out.

STIRRED to red rage by the ghoulishness of the episode, Conan raced across the road.

Neither victim nor abductors were aware of his presence until the soft swish of the dust about his feet brought them about, and then he was almost upon them, coming with gusty fury of a hill wind. Two of the blacks turned to meet him, lifting their bludgeons. But they failed to estimate properly the speed at which he was coming. One of them was down, disemboweled, before he could strike, and wheeling cat-like, Conan evaded the stroke of the other's cudgel and lashed in a whistling counter-cut. The black's head flew into the air; the headless body took three staggering steps, spurting blood and clawing horribly at the air with groping hands, and then slumped to the dust.

The remaining cannibal gave back with a strangled yell, hurling his captive from him. She tripped and rolled in the dust, and the black fled in blind panic toward the city. Conan was at his heels. Fear winged the black feet, but before they reached the easternmost hut, he sensed death at his back, and bellowed like an ox in the slaughter-yards.

"Black dog of hell!" Conan drove his sword between the dusky shoulders with such vengeful fury that the broad blade stood out half its length from the black breast. With a choking cry the black

stumbled headlong, and Conan braced his feet and dragged out his sword as his victim fell.

Only the breeze disturbed the leaves. Conan shook his head as a lion shakes its mane and growled his unsatiated blood-lust. But no more shapes slunk from the shadows, and before the huts the starlit road stretched empty. He whirled at the quick patter of feet behind him, but it was only the girl, rushing to throw herself on him and clasp his neck in a desperate grasp, frantic from terror of the abominable fate she had just escaped.

"Easy, girl," he grunted. "You're all right. How did they catch you?"

She sobbed something unintelligible. He forgot all about Aram Baksh as he scrutinized her by the light of the stars. She was white, though a very definite brunette, obviously one of Zamboula's many mixed-breeds. She was tall, with a slender, supple form, as he was in a good position to observe. Admiration burned in his fierce eyes as he looked down on her splendid bosom and her lithe limbs, which still quivered from fright and exertion. He passed an arm around her flexible waist and said, reassuringly: "Stop shaking, wench; you're safe enough."

His touch seemed to restore her shaken sanity. She tossed back her thick, glossy locks and cast a fearful glance over her shoulder, while she pressed closer to the Cimmerian as if seeking security in the contact.

"They caught me in the streets," she muttered, shuddering. "Lying in wait, beneath a dark arch—black men, like great, hulking apes! Set have mercy on me! I shall dream of it!"

"What were you doing out on the streets this time of night?" he inquired, fascinated by the satiny feel of her sleek skin under his questing fingers.

She raked back her hair and stared blankly up into his face. She did not seem aware of his caresses.

"My lover," she said. "My lover drove me into the streets. He went mad and tried to kill me. As I fled from him I was seized by those beasts."

"Beauty like yours might drive a man mad," quoth Conan, running his fingers experimentally through her glossy tresses.

She shook her head, like one emerging from a daze. She no longer trembled, and her voice was steady.

"It was the spite of a priest—of Totrasmek, the high priest of Hanuman, who desires me for himself—the dog!"

"No need to curse him for that," grinned Conan. "The old hyena has better taste than I thought."

She ignored the bluff compliment. She was regaining her poise swiftly.

"My lover is a—a young Turanian soldier. To spite me, Totrasmek gave him a drug that drove him mad. Tonight he snatched up a sword and came at me to slay me in his madness, but I fled from him into the streets. The negroes seized me and brought me to this—*what was that?*"

CONAN had already moved. Soundlessly as a shadow he drew her behind the nearest hut, beneath the straggling palms. They stood in tense stillness, while the low mutterings both had heard grew louder until voices were distinguishable. A group of negroes, some nine or ten, were coming along the road from the direction of the city. The girl clutched Conan's arm and he felt the terrified quivering of her supple body against his.

Now they could understand the gutturals of the black men.

"Our brothers are already assembled at the pit," said one. "We have had no luck. I hope they have enough for us."

"Aram promised us a man," muttered another, and Conan mentally promised Aram something.

"Aram keeps his word," grunted yet another. "Many a man we have taken from his tavern. But we pay him well. I myself have given him ten bales of silk I stole from my master. It was good silk, by Set!"

The blacks shuffled past, bare splay feet scuffing up the dust, and their voices dwindled down the road.

"Well for us those corpses are lying behind these huts," muttered Conan. "If they look in Aram's death-room they'll find another. Let's begone."

"Yes, let us hasten!" begged the girl, almost hysterical again. "My lover is wandering somewhere in the streets alone. The negroes may take him."

"A devil of a custom this is!" growled Conan, as he led the way toward the city, paralleling the road but keeping behind the huts and straggling trees. "Why don't the citizens clean out these black dogs?"

"They are valuable slaves," murmured the girl. "There are so many of them they might revolt if they were denied the flesh for which they lust. The people of Zamboula know they skulk the streets at night, and all are careful to remain within locked doors; except when something unforeseen happens, as it did to me. The blacks prey on anything they catch, but they seldom catch anybody but strangers. The people of Zamboula are not concerned with the strangers that pass through the city.

"Such men as Aram Baksh sell these strangers to the blacks. He would not dare attempt such a thing with a citizen."

Conan spat in disgust, and a moment later led his companion out into the road which was becoming a street, with still, unlighted houses on each side. Slinking in the shadows was not congenial to his nature.

"Where do you want to go?" he asked. The girl did not seem to object to his arm about her waist.

"To my house, to rouse my servants," she answered. "To bid them search for my lover. I do not wish the city—the priests—anyone—to know of his madness. He—he is a young officer with a promising future. Perhaps we can drive this madness from him if we can find him."

"If *we* find him?" rumbled Conan. "What makes you think I want to spend the night scouring the streets for a lunatic?"

She cast a quick glance into his face, and properly interpreted the gleam in his blue eyes. Any woman could have known that he would follow her wherever she led—for a while, at least. But being a woman, she concealed her knowledge of that fact.

"Please," she began with a hint of tears in her voice, "I have no one else to ask for help—you have been kind——"

"All right!" he grunted. "All right! What's the young reprobate's name?"

"Why — Alafdhal. I am Zabibi, a dancing-girl. I have danced often before the satrap, Jungir Khan, and his mistress Nafertari, and before all the lords and royal ladies of Zamboula. Totrasmek desired me, and because I repulsed him, he made me the innocent tool of his vengeance against Alafdhal. I asked a love potion of Totrasmek, not suspecting the depth of his guile and hate. He gave me a drug to mix with my lover's wine, and he swore that when Alafdhal drank it, he would love me even more madly than ever, and grant my every wish. I mixed the drug secretly with my lover's wine. But having drunk, my lover went raving mad and things came about as I have told you. Curse Totrasmek, the hybrid snake—ahhh!"

She caught his arm convulsively and

both stopped short. They had come into a district of shops and stalls, all deserted and unlighted, for the hour was late. They were passing an alley, and in its mouth a man was standing, motionless and silent. His head was lowered, but Conan caught the weird gleam of eery eyes regarding them unblinkingly. His skin crawled, not with fear of the sword in the man's hand, but because of the uncanny suggestion of his posture and silence. They suggested madness. Conan pushed the girl aside and drew his sword.

"Don't kill him!" she begged. "In the name of Set, do not slay him! You are strong—overpower him!"

"We'll see," he muttered, grasping his sword in his right hand and clenching his left into a mallet-like fist.

He took a wary step toward the alley —and with a horrible moaning laugh the Turanian charged. As he came he swung his sword, rising on his toes as he put all the power of his body behind the blows. Sparks flashed blue as Conan parried the blade, and the next instant the madman was stretched senseless in the dust from a thundering buffet of Conan's left fist.

The girl ran forward.

"Oh, he is not—he is not——"

CONAN bent swiftly, turned the man on his side and ran quick fingers over him.

"He's not hurt much," he grunted. "Bleeding at the nose, but anybody's likely to do that, after a clout on the jaw. He'll come to after a bit, and maybe his mind will be right. In the meantime I'll tie his wrists with his sword-belt—so. Now where do you want me to take him?"

"Wait!" She knelt beside the senseless figure, seized the bound hands and scanned them avidly. Then, shaking her head as if in baffled disappointment, she rose. She came close to the giant Cimmerian, and laid her slender hands on his arching breast. Her dark eyes, like wet black jewels in the starlight, gazed up into his.

"You are a man! Help me! Totrasmek must die! Slay him for me!"

"And put my neck into a Turanian noose?" he grunted.

"Nay!" The slender arms, strong as pliant steel, were around his corded neck. Her supple body throbbed against his. "The Hyrkanians have no love for Totrasmek. The priests of Set fear him. He is a mongrel, who rules men by fear and superstition. I worship Set, and the Turanians bow to Erlik, but Totrasmek sacrifices to Hanuman the accursed! The Turanian lords fear his black arts and his power over the hybrid population, and they hate him. Even Jungir Khan and his mistress Nafertari fear and hate him. If he were slain in his temple at night, they would not seek his slayer very closely."

"And what of his magic?" rumbled the Cimmerian.

"You are a fighting-man," she answered. "To risk your life is part of your profession."

"For a price," he admitted.

"There will be a price!" she breathed, rising on tiptoes, to gaze into his eyes.

The nearness of her vibrant body drove a flame through his veins. The perfume of her breath mounted to his brain. But as his arms closed about her supple figure she avoided them with a lithe movement, saying: "Wait! First serve me in this matter."

"Name your price." He spoke with some difficulty.

"Pick up my lover," she directed, and the Cimmerian stooped and swung the tall form easily to his broad shoulder. At the moment he felt as if he could have toppled over Jungir Khan's palace with

equal ease. The girl murmured an endearment to the unconscious man, and there was no hypocrisy in her attitude. She obviously loved Alafdhal sincerely. Whatever business arrangement she made with Conan would have no bearing on her relationship with Alafdhal. Women are more practical about these things than men.

"Follow me!" She hurried along the street, while the Cimmerian strode easily after her, in no way discomforted by his limp burden. He kept a wary eye out for black shadows skulking under arches, but saw nothing suspicious. Doubtless the men of Darfar were all gathered at the roasting-pit. The girl turned down a narrow side street, and presently knocked cautiously at an arched door.

Almost instantly a wicket opened in the upper panel, and a black face glanced out. She bent close to the opening, whispering swiftly. Bolts creaked in their sockets, and the door opened. A giant black man stood framed against the soft glow of a copper lamp. A quick glance showed Conan the man was not from Darfar. His teeth were unfiled and his kinky hair was cropped close to his skull. He was from the Wadai.

At a word from Zabibi, Conan gave the limp body into the black's arms, and saw the young officer laid on a velvet divan. He showed no signs of returning consciousness. The blow that had rendered him senseless might have felled an ox. Zabibi bent over him for an instant, her fingers nervously twining and twisting. Then she straightened and beckoned the Cimmerian.

The door closed softly, the locks clicked behind them, and the closing wicket shut off the glow of the lamps. In the starlight of the street Zabibi took Conan's hand. Her own hand trembled a little.

"You will not fail me?"

He shook his maned head, massive against the stars.

"Then follow me to Hanuman's shrine, and the gods have mercy on our souls!"

Along the silent streets they moved like phantoms of antiquity. They went in silence. Perhaps the girl was thinking of her lover lying senseless on the divan under the copper lamps; or was shrinking with fear of what lay ahead of them in the demon-haunted shrine of Hanuman. The barbarian was thinking only of the woman moving so supplely beside him. The perfume of her scented hair was in his nostrils, the sensuous aura of her presence filled his brain and left room for no other thoughts.

Once they heard the clank of brass-shod feet, and drew into the shadows of a gloomy arch while a squad of Pelishtim watchmen swung past. There were fifteen of them; they marched in close formation, pikes at the ready, and the rearmost men had their broad brass shields slung on their backs, to protect them from a knife-stroke from behind. The skulking menace of the black man-eaters was a threat even to armed men.

As soon as the clang of their sandals had receded up the street, Conan and the girl emerged from their hiding-place and hurried on. A few moments later they saw the squat, flat-topped edifice they sought looming ahead of them.

THE temple of Hanuman stood alone in the midst of a broad square, which lay silent and deserted beneath the stars. A marble wall surrounded the shrine, with a broad opening directly before the portico. This opening had no gate or any sort of barrier.

"Why don't the blacks seek their prey here?" muttered Conan. "There's nothing to keep them out of the temple."

He could feel the trembling of Zabibi's body as she pressed close to him.

"They fear Totrasmek, as all in Zamboula fear him, even Jungir Khan and Nafertari. Come! Come quickly, before my courage flows from me like water!"

The girl's fear was evident, but she did not falter. Conan drew his sword and strode ahead of her as they advanced through the open gateway. He knew the hideous habits of the priests of the East, and was aware that an invader of Hanuman's shrine might expect to encounter almost any sort of nightmare horror. He knew there was a good chance that neither he nor the girl would ever leave the shrine alive, but he had risked his life too many times before to devote much thought to that consideration.

They entered a court paved with marble which gleamed whitely in the starlight. A short flight of broad marble steps led up to the pillared portico. The great bronze doors stood wide open as they had stood for centuries. But no worshippers burnt incense within. In the day men and women might come timidly into the shrine and place offerings to the ape-god on the black altar. At night the people shunned the temple of Hanuman as hares shun the lair of the serpent.

Burning censers bathed the interior in a soft weird glow that created an illusion of unreality. Near the rear wall, behind the black stone altar, sat the god with his gaze fixed for ever on the open door, through which for centuries his victims had come, dragged by chains of roses. A faint groove ran from the sill to the altar, and when Conan's foot felt it, he stepped away as quickly as if he had trodden upon a snake. That groove had been worn by the faltering feet of the multitude of those who had died screaming on that grim altar.

Bestial in the uncertain light Hanuman leered with his carven mask. He sat, not as an ape would crouch, but cross-legged as a man would sit, but his aspect was no less simian for that reason. He was carved from black marble, but his eyes were rubies, which glowed red and lustful as the coals of hell's deepest pits. His great hands lay upon his lap, palms upward, taloned fingers spread and grasping. In the gross emphasis of his attributes, in the leer of his satyr-countenance, was reflected the abominable cynicism of the degenerate cult which deified him.

The girl moved around the image, making toward the back wall, and when her sleek flank brushed against a carven knee, she shrank aside and shuddered as if a reptile had touched her. There was a space of several feet between the broad back of the idol and the marble wall with its frieze of gold leaves. On either hand, flanking the idol, an ivory door under a gold arch was set in the wall.

"Those doors open into each end of a hair-pin shaped corridor," she said hurriedly. "Once I was in the interior of the shrine—once!" She shivered and twitched her slim shoulders at a memory both terrifying and obscene. "The corridor is bent like a horseshoe, with each horn opening into this room. Totrasmek's chambers are enclosed within the curve of the corridor and open into it. But there is a secret door in this wall which opens directly into an inner chamber——"

She began to run her hands over the smooth surface, where no crack or crevice showed. Conan stood beside her, sword in hand, glancing warily about him. The silence, the emptiness of the shrine, with imagination picturing what might lie behind that wall, made him feel like a wild beast nosing a trap.

"Ah!" The girl had found a hidden spring at last; a square opening gaped blackly in the wall. Then: "Set!" she screamed, and even as Conan leaped

toward her, he saw that a great misshapen hand had fastened itself in her hair. She was snatched off her feet and jerked head-first through the opening. Conan, grabbing ineffectually at her, felt his fingers slip from a naked limb, and in an instant she had vanished and the wall showed blank as before. Only from beyond it came briefly the muffled sounds of a struggle, a scream, faintly heard, and a low laugh that made Conan's blood congeal in his veins.

3. Black Hands Gripping

WITH an oath the Cimmerian smote the wall a terrific blow with the pommel of his sword, and the marble cracked and chipped. But the hidden door did not give way, and reason told him that doubtless it had been bolted on the other side of the wall. Turning, he sprang across the chamber to one of the ivory doors.

He lifted his sword to shatter the panels, but on a venture tried the door first with his left hand. It swung open easily, and he glared into a long corridor that curved away into dimness under the weird light of censers similar to those in the shrine. A heavy gold bolt showed on the jamb of the door, and he touched it lightly with his finger tips. The faint warmness of the metal could have been detected only by a man whose faculties were akin to those of a wolf. That bolt had been touched—and therefore drawn—within the last few seconds. The affair was taking on more and more of the aspect of a baited trap. He might have known Totrasmek would know when anyone entered the temple.

To enter the corridor would undoubtedly be to walk into whatever trap the priest had set for him. But Conan did not hesitate. Somewhere in that dim-lit interior Zabibi was a captive, and, from what he knew of the characteristics of Hanuman's priests, he was sure that she needed help badly. Conan stalked into the corridor with a pantherish tread, poised to strike right or left.

On his left, ivory, arched doors opened into the corridor, and he tried each in turn. All were locked. He had gone perhaps seventy-five feet when the corridor bent sharply to the left, describing the curve the girl had mentioned. A door opened into this curve, and it gave under his hand.

He was looking into a broad, square chamber, somewhat more clearly lighted than the corridor. Its walls were of white marble, the floor of ivory, the ceiling of fretted silver. He saw divans of rich satin, gold-worked footstools of ivory, a disk-shaped table of some massive, metal-like substance. On one of the divans a man was reclining, looking toward the door. He laughed as he met the Cimmerian's startled glare.

This man was naked except for a loincloth and high-strapped sandals. He was brown-skinned, with close-cropped black hair and restless black eyes that set off a broad, arrogant face. In girth and breadth he was enormous, with huge limbs on which the great muscles swelled and rippled at each slightest movement. His hands were the largest Conan had ever seen. The assurance of gigantic physical strength colored his every action and inflection.

"Why not enter, barbarian?" he called mockingly, with an exaggerated gesture of invitation.

Conan's eyes began to smolder ominously, but he trod warily into the chamber, his sword ready.

"Who the devil are you?" he growled.

"I am Baal-pteor," the man answered. "Once, long ago and in another land, I had another name. But this is a good name, and why Totrasmek gave it to me, any temple wench can tell you."

"So you're his dog!" grunted Conan. "Well, curse your brown hide, Baal-pteor, where's the wench you jerked through the wall?"

"My master entertains her!" laughed Baal-pteor. "Listen!"

From beyond a door opposite the one by which Conan had entered there sounded a woman's scream, faint and muffled in the distance.

"Blast your soul!" Conan took a stride toward the door, then wheeled with his skin tingling. Baal-pteor was laughing at him, and that laugh was edged with menace that made the hackles rise on Conan's neck and sent a red wave of murder-lust driving across his vision.

He started toward Baal-pteor, the knuckles on his sword-hand showing white. With a swift motion the brown man threw something at him—a shining crystal sphere that glistened in the weird light.

Conan dodged instinctively, but, miraculously, the globe stopped short in midair, a few feet from his face. It did not fall to the floor. It hung suspended, as if by invisible filaments, some five feet above the floor. And as he glared in amazement, it began to rotate with growing speed. And as it revolved it grew, expanded, became nebulous. It filled the chamber. It enveloped him. It blotted out furniture, walls, the smiling countenance of Baal-pteor. He was lost in the midst of a blinding bluish blur of whirling speed. Terrific winds screamed past Conan, tugging, tearing at him, striving to wrench him from his feet, to drag him into the vortex that spun madly before him.

With a choking cry Conan lurched backward, reeled, felt the solid wall against his back. At the contact the illusion ceased to be. The whirling, titanic sphere vanished like a bursting bubble. Conan reeled upright in the silver-ceilinged room, with a gray mist coiling about his feet, and saw Baal-pteor lolling on the divan, shaking with silent laughter.

"Son of a slut!" Conan lunged at him. But the mist swirled up from the floor, blotting out that giant brown form. Groping in a rolling cloud that blinded him, Conan felt a rending sensation of dislocation—and then room and mist and brown man were gone together. He was standing alone among the high reeds of a marshy fen, and a buffalo was lunging at him, head down. He leaped aside from the ripping simitar-curved horns, and drove his sword in behind the foreleg, through ribs and heart. And then it was not a buffalo dying there in the mud, but the brown-skinned Baal-pteor. With a curse Conan struck off his head; and the head soared from the ground and snapped beast-like tusks into his throat. For all his mighty strength he could not tear it loose—he was choking—strangling; then there was a rush and roar through space, the dislocating shock of an immeasurable impact, and he was back in the chamber with Baal-pteor, whose head was once more set firmly on his shoulders, and who laughed silently at him from the divan.

"Mesmerism!" muttered Conan, crouching and digging his toes hard against the marble.

His eyes blazed. This brown dog was playing with him, making sport of him! But this mummery, this child's play of mists and shadows of thought, it could not harm him. He had but to leap and strike and the brown acolyte would be a mangled corpse under his heel. This time he would not be fooled by shadows of illusion—but he was.

A blood-curdling snarl sounded behind him, and he wheeled and struck in a flash at the panther crouching to spring

on him from the metal-colored table. Even as he struck, the apparition vanished and his blade clashed deafeningly on the adamantine surface. Instantly he sensed something abnormal. The blade stuck to the table! He wrenched at it savagely. It did not give. This was no mesmeristic trick. The table was a giant magnet. He gripped the hilt with both hands, when a voice at his shoulder brought him about, to face the brown man, who had at last risen from the divan.

SLIGHTLY taller than Conan, and much heavier, Baal-pteor loomed before him, a daunting image of muscular development. His mighty arms were unnaturally long, and his great hands opened and closed, twitching convulsively. Conan released the hilt of his imprisoned sword and fell silent, watching his enemy through slitted lids.

"Your head, Cimmerian!" taunted Baal-pteor. "I shall take it with my bare hands, twisting it from your shoulders as the head of a fowl is twisted! Thus the sons of Kosala offer sacrifice to Yajur. Barbarian, you look upon a strangler of Yota-pong. I was chosen by the priests of Yajur in my infancy, and throughout childhood, boyhood and youth I was trained in the art of slaying with the naked hands—for only thus are the sacrifices enacted. Yajur loves blood, and we waste not a drop from the victim's veins. When I was a child they gave me infants to throttle; when I was a boy I strangled young girls; as a youth, women, old men and young boys. Not until I reached my full manhood was I given a strong man to slay on the altar of Yota-pong.

"For years I offered the sacrifices to Yajur. Hundreds of necks have snapped between these fingers——" he worked them before the Cimmerian's angry eyes. "Why I fled from Yota-pong to become Totrasmek's servant is no concern of yours. In a moment you will be beyond curiosity. The priests of Kosala, the stranglers of Yajur, are strong beyond the belief of men. And I was stronger than any. With my hands, barbarian, I shall break your neck!"

And like the stroke of twin cobras, the great hands closed on Conan's throat. The Cimmerian made no attempt to dodge or fend them away, but his own hands darted to the Kosalan's bull-neck. Baal-pteor's black eyes widened as he felt the thick cords of muscles that protected the barbarian's throat. With a snarl he exerted his inhuman strength, and knots and lumps and ropes of thews rose along his massive arms. And then a choking gasp burst from him as Conan's fingers locked on his throat. For an instant they stood there like statues, their faces masks of effort, veins beginning to stand out purply on their temples. Conan's thin lips drew back from his teeth in a grinning snarl. Baal-pteor's eyes were distended; in them grew an awful surprize and the glimmer of fear. Both men stood motionless as images, except for the expanding of their muscles on rigid arms and braced legs, but strength beyond common conception was warring there—strength that might have uprooted trees and crushed the skulls of bullocks.

The wind whistled suddenly from between Baal-pteor's parted teeth. His face was growing purple. Fear flooded his eyes. His thews seemed ready to burst from his arms and shoulders, yet the muscles of the Cimmerian's thick neck did not give; they felt like masses of woven iron cords under his desperate fingers. But his own flesh was giving way under the iron fingers of the Cimmerian which ground deeper and deeper into the yielding throat-muscles, crushing them in upon jugular and windpipe.

The statuesque immobility of the group gave way to sudden, frenzied motion, as the Kosalan began to wrench and heave, seeking to throw himself backward. He let go of Conan's throat and grasped his wrists, trying to tear away those inexorable fingers.

With a sudden lunge Conan bore him backward until the small of his back crashed against the table. And still farther over its edge Conan bent him, back and back, until his spine was ready to snap.

Conan's low laugh was merciless as the ring of steel.

"You fool!" he all but whispered. "I think you never saw a man from the West before. Did you deem yourself strong, because you were able to twist the heads off civilized folk, poor weaklings with muscles like rotten string? Hell! Break the neck of a wild Cimmerian bull before you call yourself strong. I did that, before I was a full-grown man—like this!"

And with a savage wrench he twisted Baal-pteor's head around until the ghastly face leered over the left shoulder, and the vertebræ snapped like a rotten branch.

Conan hurled the flopping corpse to the floor, turned to the sword again and gripped the hilt with both hands, bracing his feet against the floor. Blood trickled down his broad breast from the wounds Baal-pteor's finger nails had torn in the skin of his neck. His black hair was damp, sweat ran down his face, and his chest heaved. For all his vocal scorn of Baal-pteor's strength, he had almost met his match in the inhuman Kosalan. But without pausing to catch his breath, he exerted all his strength in a mighty wrench that tore the sword from the magnet where it clung.

Another instant and he had pushed open the door from behind which the scream had sounded, and was looking down a long straight corridor, lined with ivory doors. The other end was masked by a rich velvet curtain, and from beyond that curtain came the devilish strains of such music as Conan had never heard, not even in nightmares. It made the short hairs bristle on the back of his neck. Mingled with it was the panting, hysterical sobbing of a woman. Grasping his sword firmly, he glided down the corridor.

4. *Dance, Girl, Dance!*

When Zabibi was jerked head-first through the aperture which opened in the wall behind the idol, her first, dizzy, disconnected thought was that her time had come. She instinctively shut her eyes and waited for the blow to fall. But instead she felt herself dumped unceremoniously onto the smooth marble floor, which bruised her knees and hip. Opening her eyes she stared fearfully around her, just as a muffled impact sounded from beyond the wall. She saw a brown-skinned giant in a loin-cloth standing over her, and, across the chamber into which she had come, a man sat on a divan, with his back to a rich black velvet curtain, a broad, fleshy man, with fat white hands and snaky eyes. And her flesh crawled, for this man was Totrasmek, the priest of Hanuman, who for years had spun his slimy webs of power throughout the city of Zamboula.

"The barbarian seeks to batter his way through the wall," said Totrasmek sardonically, "but the bolt will hold."

The girl saw that a heavy golden bolt had been shot across the hidden door, which was plainly discernible from this side of the wall. The bolt and its sockets would have resisted the charge of an elephant.

"Go open one of the doors for him, Baal-pteor," ordered Totrasmek. "Slay

him in the square chamber at the other end of the corridor."

The Kosalan salaamed and departed by the way of a door in the side wall of the chamber. Zabibi rose, staring fearfully at the priest, whose eyes ran avidly over her splendid figure. To this she was indifferent. A dancer of Zamboula was accustomed to nakedness. But the cruelty in his eyes started her limbs to quivering.

"Again you come to me in my retreat, beautiful one," he purred with cynical hypocrisy. "It is an unexpected honor. You seemed to enjoy your former visit so little, that I dared not hope for you to repeat it. Yet I did all in my power to provide you with an interesting experience."

For a Zamboula dancer to blush would be an impossibility, but a smolder of anger mingled with the fear in Zabibi's dilated eyes.

"Fat pig! You know I did not come here for love of you."

"No," laughed Totrasmek, "you came like a fool, creeping through the night with a stupid barbarian to cut my throat. Why should you seek my life?"

"You know why!" she cried, knowing the futility of trying to dissemble.

"You are thinking of your lover," he laughed. "The fact that you are here seeking my life shows that he quaffed the drug I gave you. Well, did you not ask for it? And did I not send what you asked for, out of the love I bear you?"

"I asked you for a drug that would make him slumber harmlessly for a few hours," she said bitterly. "And you—you sent your servant with a drug that drove him mad! I was a fool ever to trust you. I might have known your protestations of friendship were lies, to disguise your hate and spite."

"Why did you wish your lover to sleep?" he retorted. "So you could steal from him the only thing he would never give you—the ring with the jewel men call the Star of Khorala—the star stolen from the queen of Ophir, who would pay a roomful of gold for its return. He would not give it to you willingly, because he knew that it holds a magic which, when properly controlled, will enslave the hearts of any of the opposite sex. You wished to steal it from him, fearing that his magicians would discover the key to that magic and he would forget you in his conquests of the queens of the world. You would sell it back to the queen of Ophir, who understands its power and would use it to enslave men, as she did before it was stolen."

"And why did *you* want it?" she demanded sulkily.

"I understand its powers. It would increase the power of my arts."

"Well," she snapped, "you have it now!"

"*I* have the Star of Khorala? Nay, you err."

"Why bother to lie?" she retorted bitterly. "He had it on his finger when he drove me into the streets. He did not have it when I found him again. Your servant must have been watching the house, and have taken it from him, after I escaped him. To the devil with it! I want my lover back sane and whole. You have the ring; you have punished us both. Why do you not restore his mind to him? Can you?"

"I could," he assured her, in evident enjoyment of her distress. He drew a phial from among his robes. "This contains the juice of the golden lotus. If your lover drank it he would be sane again. Yes, I will be merciful. You have both thwarted and flouted me, not once but many times; he has constantly opposed my wishes. But I will be merciful. Come and take the phial from my hand."

She stared at Totrasmek, trembling with eagerness to seize it, but fearing it was but some cruel jest. She advanced timidly, with a hand extended, and he laughed heartlessly and drew back out of her reach. Even as her lips parted to curse him, some instinct snatched her eyes upward. From the gilded ceiling four jade-hued vessels were falling. She dodged, but they did not strike her. They crashed to the floor about her, forming the four corners of a square. And she screamed, and screamed again. For out of each ruin reared the hooded head of a cobra, and one struck at her bare leg. Her convulsive movement to evade it brought her within reach of the one on the other side and again she had to shift like lightning to avoid the flash of its hideous head.

She was caught in a frightful trap. All four serpents were swaying and striking at foot, ankle, calf, knee, thigh, hip, whatever portion of her voluptuous body chanced to be nearest to them, and she could not spring over them or pass between them to safety. She could only whirl and spring aside and twist her body to avoid the strokes, and each time she moved to dodge one snake, the motion brought her within range of another, so that she had to keep shifting with the speed of light. She could move only a short space in any direction, and the fearful hooded crests were menacing her every second. Only a dancer of Zamboula could have lived in that grisly square.

She became, herself, a blur of bewildering motion. The heads missed her by hair's breadths, but they missed, as she pitted her twinkling feet, flickering limbs and perfect eye against the blinding speed of the scaly demons her enemy had conjured out of thin air.

Somewhere a thin whining music struck up, mingling with the hissing of the serpents, like an evil night-wind blowing through the empty sockets of a skull. Even in the flying speed of her urgent haste she realized that the darting of the serpents was no longer at random. They obeyed the grisly piping of the eery music. They struck with a horrible rhythm, and perforce her swaying, writhing, spinning body attuned itself to their rhythm. Her frantic motions melted into the measures of a dance compared to which the most obscene tarantella of Zamora would have seemed sane and restrained. Sick with shame and terror Zabibi heard the hateful mirth of her merciless tormenter.

"The Dance of the Cobras, my lovely one!" laughed Totrasmek. "So maidens danced in the sacrifice to Hanuman centuries ago—but never with such beauty and suppleness. Dance, girl, dance! How long can you avoid the fangs of the Poison People? Minutes? Hours? You will weary at last. Your swift, sure feet will stumble, your legs falter, your hips slow in their rotations. Then the fangs will begin to sink deep into your ivory flesh——"

Behind him the curtain shook as if struck by a gust of wind, and Totrasmek screamed. His eyes dilated and his hands caught convulsively at the length of bright steel which jutted suddenly from his breast.

The music broke off short. The girl swayed dizzily in her dance, crying out in dreadful anticipation of the flickering fangs—and then only four wisps of harmless blue smoke curled up from the floor about her, as Totrasmek sprawled headlong from the divan.

Conan came from behind the curtain, wiping his broad blade. Looking through the hangings he had seen the girl dancing desperately between four swaying spirals of smoke, but he had guessed that their appearance was very different to her. He knew he had killed Totrasmek.

Zabibi sank down on the floor, panting, but even as Conan started toward her, she staggered up again, though her legs trembled with exhaustion.

"The phial!" she gasped. "The phial!"

Totrasmek still grasped it in his stiffening hand. Ruthlessly she tore it from his locked fingers, and then began frantically to ransack his garments.

"What the devil are you looking for?" Conan demanded.

"A ring—he stole it from Alafdhal. He must have, while my lover walked in madness through the streets. Set's devils!"

She had convinced herself that it was not on the person of Totrasmek. She began to cast about the chamber, tearing up divan-covers and hangings, and upsetting vessels.

She paused and raked a damp lock of hair out of her eyes.

"I forgot Baal-pteor!"

"He's in hell with his neck broken," Conan assured her.

She expressed vindictive gratification at the news, but an instant later swore expressively.

"We can't stay here. It's not many hours until dawn. Lesser priests are likely to visit the temple at any hour of the night, and if we're discovered here with his corpse, the people will tear us to pieces. The Turanians could not save us."

SHE lifted the bolt on the secret door, and a few moments later they were in the streets and hurrying away from the silent square where brooded the age-old shrine of Hanuman.

In a winding street a short distance away Conan halted and checked his companion with a heavy hand on her naked shoulder.

"Don't forget there was a price——"

"I have not forgotten!" She twisted free. "But we must go to—to Alafdhal first!"

A few minutes later the black slave let them through the wicket door. The young Turanian lay upon the divan, his arms and legs bound with heavy velvet ropes. His eyes were open, but they were like those of a mad dog, and foam was thick on his lips. Zabibi shuddered.

"Force his jaws open!" she commanded, and Conan's iron fingers accomplished the task.

Zabibi emptied the phial down the maniac's gullet. The effect was like magic. Instantly he became quiet. The glare faded from his eyes; he stared up at the girl in a puzzled way, but with recognition and intelligence. Then he fell into a normal slumber.

"When he awakes he will be quite sane," she whispered, motioning to the silent slave.

With a deep bow he gave into her hands a small leathern bag, and drew about her shoulders a silken cloak. Her manner had subtly changed when she beckoned Conan to follow her out of the chamber.

In an arch that opened on the street, she turned to him, drawing herself up with a new regality.

"I must now tell you the truth," she said. "I am not Zabibi. I am Nafertari. And *he* is not Alafdhal, a poor captain of the guardsmen. He is Jungir Khan, satrap of Zamboula."

Conan made no comment; his scarred dark countenance was immobile.

"I lied to you because I dared not divulge the truth to anyone," she said. "We were alone when Jungir Khan went mad. None knew of it but myself. Had it been known that the satrap of Zamboula was a madman, there would have been instant revolt and rioting, even as Totrasmek planned, who plotted our destruction.

"You see now how impossible is the reward for which you hoped. The satrap's mistress is not—cannot be for you. But you shall not go unrewarded. Here is a sack of gold."

She gave him the bag she had received from the slave.

"Go, now, and when the sun is up come to the palace. I will have Jungir Khan make you captain of his guard. But you will take your orders from me, secretly. Your first duty will be to march a squad to the shrine of Hanuman, ostensibly to search for clues of the priest's slayer; in reality to search for the Star of Khorala. It must be hidden there somewhere. When you find it, bring it to me. You have my leave to go now."

He nodded, still silent, and strode away. The girl, watching the swing of his broad shoulders, was piqued to note that there was nothing in his bearing to show that he was in any way chagrined or abashed.

When he had rounded a corner, he glanced back, and then changed his direction and quickened his pace. A few moments later he was in the quarter of the city containing the Horse Market. There he smote on a door until from the window above a bearded head was thrust to demand the reason for the disturbance.

"A horse," demanded Conan. "The swiftest steed you have."

"I open no gates at this time of night," grumbled the horse-trader.

Conan rattled his coins.

"Dog's son knave! Don't you see I'm white, and alone? Come down, before I smash your door!"

Presently, on a bay stallion, Conan was riding toward the house of Aram Baksh.

He turned off the road into the alley that lay between the tavern compound and the date-palm garden, but he did not pause at the gate. He rode on to the northeast corner of the wall, then turned and rode along the north wall, to halt within a few paces of the northwest angle. No trees grew near the wall, but there were some low bushes. To one of these he tied his horse, and was about to climb into the saddle again, when he heard a low muttering of voices beyond the corner of the wall.

Drawing his foot from the stirrup he stole to the angle and peered around it. Three men were moving down the road toward the palm groves, and from their slouching gait he knew they were negroes. They halted at his low call, bunching themselves as he strode toward them, his sword in his hand. Their eyes gleamed whitely in the starlight. Their brutish lust shone in their ebony faces, but they knew their three cudgels could not prevail against his sword, just as he knew it.

"Where are you going?" he challenged.

"To bid our brothers put out the fire in the pit beyond the groves," was the sullen, guttural reply. "Aram Baksh promised us a man, but he lied. We found one of our brothers dead in the trap-chamber. We go hungry this night."

"I think not," smiled Conan. "Aram Baksh will give you a man. Do you see that door?"

He pointed to a small, iron-bound portal set in the midst of the western wall.

"Wait there. Aram Baksh will give you a man."

Backing warily away until he was out of reach of a sudden bludgeon blow, he turned and melted around the northwest angle of the wall. Reaching his horse he paused to ascertain that the blacks were not sneaking after him, and then he climbed into the saddle and stood upright on it, quieting the uneasy steed with a low word. He reached up,

grasped the coping of the wall and drew himself up and over. There he studied the grounds for an instant. The tavern was built in the southwest corner of the enclosure, the remaining space of which was occupied by groves and gardens. He saw no one in the grounds. The tavern was dark and silent, and he knew all the doors and windows were barred and bolted.

CONAN knew that Aram Baksh slept in a chamber that opened into a cypress-bordered path that led to the door in the western wall. Like a shadow he glided among the trees and a few moments later he rapped lightly on the chamber door.

"What is it?" asked a rumbling voice within.

"Aram Baksh!" hissed Conan. "The blacks are stealing over the wall!"

Almost instantly the door opened, framing the tavern-keeper, naked but for his shirt, with a dagger in his hand.

He craned his neck to stare into the Cimmerian's face.

"What tale is this—*you!*"

Conan's vengeful fingers strangled the yell in his throat. They went to the floor together and Conan wrenched the dagger from his enemy's hand. The blade glinted in the starlight, and blood spurted. Aram Baksh made hideous noises, gasping and gagging on a mouthful of blood. Conan dragged him to his feet and again the dagger slashed, and most of the curly beard fell to the floor.

Still gripping his captive's throat—for a man can scream incoherently even with his tongue slit—Conan dragged him out of the dark chamber and down the cypress-shadowed path, to the iron-bound door in the outer wall. With one hand he lifted the bolt and threw the door open, disclosing the three shadowy figures which waited like black vultures outside. Into their eager arms Conan thrust the innkeeper.

A horrible, blood-choked scream rose from the Zamboulan's throat, but there was no response from the silent tavern. The people there were used to screams outside the wall. Aram Baksh fought like a wild man, his distended eyes turned frantically on the Cimmerian's face. He found no mercy there. Conan was thinking of the scores of wretches who owed their bloody doom to this man's greed.

In glee the negroes dragged him down the road, mocking his frenzied gibberings. How could they recognize Aram Baksh in this half-naked, blood-stained figure, with the grotesquely shorn beard and unintelligible babblings? The sounds of the struggle came back to Conan, standing beside the gate, even after the clump of figures had vanished among the palms.

Closing the door behind him, Conan returned to his horse, mounted and turned westward, toward the open desert, swinging wide to skirt the sinister belt of palm groves. As he rode, he drew from his belt a ring in which gleamed a jewel that snared the starlight in a shimmering iridescence. He held it up to admire it, turning it this way and that. The compact bag of gold pieces clinked gently at his saddle-bow, like a promise of the greater riches to come.

"I wonder what she'd say if she knew I recognized her as Nafertari and him as Jungir Khan the instant I saw them," he mused. "I knew the Star of Khorala, too. There'll be a fine scene if she ever guesses that I slipped it off his finger while I was tying him with his sword-belt. But they'll never catch me, with the start I'm getting."

He glanced back at the shadowy palm groves, among which a red glare was mounting. A chanting rose to the night, vibrating with savage exultation. And another sound mingled with it, a mad, incoherent screaming, a frenzied gibbering in which no words could be distinguished. The noise followed Conan as he rode westward beneath the paling stars.

In Thessaly

By CLARK ASHTON SMITH

When I lay dead in Thessaly,
The land was rife with sorcery:
Fair witches howled to Hecate,
Pouring the blood of rams by night
With many a necromantic rite
To draw me back for their delight. . . .

But I lay dead in Thessaly
With all my lust and wizardry:
Somewhere the Golden Ass went by
To munch the rose, and find again
The shape and manlihead of men:
But in my grave I stirred not then,

And the black lote in Thessaly
Its juices dripped unceasingly
Upon the rotting mouth of me;
And worm and mold and graveyard must,
And roots of cypress, darkly thrust,
Transformed the dead to utter dust.

The Consuming Flame

By PAUL ERNST

The price of a life—ten million dollars! An utterly amazing story about the exploits of the world's weirdest criminal, who calls himself Doctor Satan

1. The Night Explodes

THE service telephone rang. The chauffeur, in whipcord pants and shirt sleeves, picked it up. The crisp voice of Besson, president and majority stockholder of Besson Motors, sounded out.

"Carlisle, is the sedan in running order?"

The chauffeur stared at the phone with bulging eyes. His gasp sounded out. Then he collected his wits, and said: "Of course, sir."

"Bring it around to the side entrance, then," Besson ordered. "Full tank, check everything. I'm going to drive down to Cleveland. I'll drive it myself."

Carlisle kept staring at the phone in that unbelieving way. He opened his lips several times as if to express the amazement showing on his face. But no words came.

"Well? Do you hear me?" snapped Besson.

"Yes, sir," responded the chauffeur. "Certainly, sir. The sedan will be at the side entrance at once, sir."

He hung up, swore in profound perplexity, then shrugged into his whipcord coat and went downstairs to the garage.

He got into the sedan, an immense, gleaming thing built specially in the shops of the Besson Motors Company, and sent it out of the wide doors and down the graveled lane to the portico of the Besson mansion.

He got out of the car and waited respectfully for the master to appear. But while he waited, with a bemused scowl, he felt the car's radiator.

It was quite warm. The car *had* been used recently.

Besson came out of the door, followed by a footman who carried a small bag and a brief-case. Besson was a short man, heavy-set, inclined to rather loud checked suits which would have looked humorous on his squat frame had it not been for the quiet, tremendous power lying obviously in eye and jaw. No one laughed after looking into the motor magnate's face!

"Everything ready?" said Besson.

"Yes, sir," nodded the chauffeur.

Once more he seemed to be on the verge of saying something further, but once more he repressed himself.

Besson got into the car. The footman put the bag and case in the rear. Besson nodded bruskly to the two servants, and sent the great machine out of the drive and swirling onto the street with the practised rapidity that was still his after his early years as a race-track driver before he had made his money. The sedan hummed out of sight in an incredibly short time.

CARLISLE turned to the footman. In the chauffeur's eyes was something like fear, and small beads of perspiration stood out on his forehead.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said.

"What's up?" said the footman.

"You are mine, Beatrice Dale," Doctor Satan said softly.

"The boss! Either he's going crazy—or I am."

"Why?"

"An hour ago," explained Carlisle, "the chief came out to the garage. I was washing down the town car. He called to me to ask if the sedan was checked, and I said it was. He got into it and drove out of the garage with it. He had a bag, and I thought he was starting his Cleveland trip then. It seemed kind of funny that he came out to the garage himself for the car instead of having me bring it around, but I didn't pay too much attention to it."

"He started out an hour ago, with a bag?" said the footman, staring. "That's funny."

"It isn't as funny as what happened next," Carlisle said. "In twenty-five minutes I heard a car roll into the garage—I was upstairs in my rooms. I came down, and there was the sedan. So I figured the boss had changed his mind and wasn't going to Cleveland after all.

"I went back upstairs, and three minutes ago, I'll be damned if he didn't phone out, ask if the sedan was checked, and tell me to bring it around to the side door here—just as if he hadn't been out

in the thing himself a little while ago and *knew* it was checked and ready for the trip."

"First the boss came out and drove away himself?" repeated the footman. "Then, just now, he called for the car to be sent around, just as though he hadn't been in it the first time? That *is* funny! In fact—it's impossible."

Carlisle stared at him, forehead wrinkled.

"For the last hour," said the footman, "Mr. Besson has been in his rooms. I overheard him dictating a few letters to his private secretary, and I helped his man pack his bag. So he couldn't have driven out of the garage and then back again!"

The chauffeur bit his lip. He was silent for a long time as the meaning of the statement came home to him.

"He didn't drive out of the garage an hour ago and come back again twenty-five minutes later? Then who did? And why?"

The footman shook his head.

"Did you see the boss's face?"

"No," admitted the chauffeur. "As I said, I was washing down the town car. I heard his voice, and saw his body as he climbed in behind the wheel. But it was his voice! I'll swear to that."

"Well," said the footman slowly, "somebody besides Besson took that car out for half an hour. I wonder—if they did something to it?"

The chauffeur wiped sweat from his forehead.

"It—it felt all right as I drove it out of the garage. But if a steering-rod was sawed half in two, or something——"

He stopped. Besson was a notoriously fast driver. He burned the roads at ninety miles an hour in his frequent trips to cities near Detroit.

"Maybe nothing was done to the car," said the footman through lips inclined to be a little pale. "Better not say anything, anyhow, about this. It might get you into trouble."

Carlisle nodded. He went back to the garage. But on his face a look of foreboding grew.

With all his heart he hoped the sedan hadn't been tampered with. But common sense told him it must have been. A man wouldn't take risk and trouble to get it off the Besson property for half an hour without some reason behind the act.

"Who took that car out?" he whispered to himself as he went up to his quarters again. *"And what did they do to it?"*

OUT along the road to Cleveland, Besson sent the great sedan leaping like a live thing, unaware of the short trip it had made before he stepped into it. It was only eight in the evening. The road was fairly crowded with traffic; so Besson did not hit his highest road speed. The speedometer needle quivered at seventy.

Besson frowned a little in a puzzled way. And he *was* puzzled. He squirmed uneasily behind the wheel of the car.

His nerves felt as though each tiny end were being filed. And his hair was acting queerly. It had a tendency to rise on his scalp, prickling and itching as if it had turned to fine wires.

He took his hands off the wheel for an instant to see if there were a short circuit somewhere in the ignition system that was sending a little current up the steering-column and into the wheel. His sensation was vaguely of the kind induced by a slight electric shock. But lifting his hands from the wheel did not lessen the sensation. And glancing down at the seat beside him he saw that a bit of paper from a torn cigarette package clung to the velour as tissue paper clings to a comb that has just been drawn through hair.

Traffic cleared. Frowning, Besson pressed harder on the accelerator. The car leaped up to ninety-four miles an hour, roaring down the road with a sonorous, low-pitched scream.

No man saw what happened after that. A dozen pairs of eyes were drawn to the spot a second later; but none observed the entire proceeding.

At one moment the special-built car was racing along the concrete. At the next there was an enormous flare of violet-colored light—and there was no car there. Furthermore, there was no trace anywhere on the road or along the road that such a car had existed.

Besson, the sedan and everything else, had utterly disappeared.

A woman behind the counter of a roadside stand was the first of the dozen witnesses to break the awful silence following the blinding violet flare in which a man and a car had vanished utterly from the earth.

"Oh, my God!" she screamed.

It snapped the spell. Truck drivers, pleasure car owners, proprietors and patrons of the roadside stands near by, raced to the spot.

"My God!" the woman screamed again, shrill and high.

The men did not cry out, nor did they say anything. They simply looked first at each other and then at the road.

A long black streak of charred concrete was all the evidence left of the speeding sedan.

2. *The Death Engine*

IN THE experimental room of the Dryer Automobile Corporation, three men stood looking at a roadster.

Outside, in the great shop, all was thunder and clangor. The big machines that turned out the production stream of Detroit's third largest motor factory were so expensive that they had to be run day and night; so that now, at ten in the evening, the uproar was as great as at ten in the morning.

But here in the corner laboratory the roar penetrated only as a murmur, and in critical silence the three men examined the roadster.

It was a tremendous thing. The wheelbase was nearly a hundred and sixty inches. The hood sloped off and away from the windshield as if the power of a locomotive were under it—which was almost the truth. It gleamed with the finest and latest of enamels; a toy to delight the heart of a rajah.

"Everything is all right?" said the chief engineer to a mechanic in dungarees near by.

"Listen for yourself," said the mechanic, switching on the motor.

Standing right next to the hood, you could scarcely hear the engine. The engineer nodded. A sour look was on his face.

"Twenty-eight thousand, that thing cost to build. Well, it's some car. It'll do about a hundred and forty, won't it?"

"A hundred and forty-eight," said the mechanic.

The engineer grinned bleakly.

"And Dryer's pampered son will use the speed, too. This is certainly a birthday present! When is it to be delivered?"

"First thing in the morning," replied the assistant. "I got orders two hours ago. I'm to drive it up in front of the Dryer house and leave it to 'surprize' Tom Dryer. Though he knows all about it, of course."

The head engineer turned to the mechanic.

"Stick a canvas over it," he ordered. "It would be a shame to get a scratch on papa's darling's plaything. I'll lock up."

The mechanic draped a great canvas, such as painters use, over the enormous

roadster. The men went to the door of the experimental room, and stepped out into the clangor of the shop. The engineer locked it.

But behind that closed door was not emptiness.

As the lock clicked on the room and the roadster, a shadow stirred in a far corner near a work-bench. The shadow was that of a man who had been lurking in there for over an hour.

The man, a shapeless outline in the darkness, went toward the roadster. He lifted the canvas from over the hood and raised the hood catch. From his pocket he took what appeared to be an aluminum box, a third as big as a cigar-box. He attached it to the reverse side of the dashboard.

From the box trailed four fine wires. One went to each wheel of the roadster. Then the man worked with the wheels. To each spoke was attached an almost invisible, flexible fin of colorless material. The fine trailing wires were adjusted so that the ends would almost touch the fins on the spokes as the wheels whirled.

The shadowy figure fastened the hood down and replaced the canvas. It glided toward the door. Over the penetrating roar of the busy shop outside sounded a faint laugh. It was an icy, blood-chilling sound, twice repeated. Then the door opened as if it had never been locked—closed again, this time on a room containing no human thing, but in which was a roadster that was far indeed from being the same mechanism as that which had been hand-built in the shop.

It was hardly fifteen minutes later when the door was opened once more and the lights switched on.

The chief engineer and another man were in the doorway. The other man was young, barely twenty-four. He was blond, dressed in a tuxedo, with no hat on and with his hair rumpled a little. His blue eyes were too bright, and he swayed a bit on his feet.

"I'm going to take her out, I tell you," he was insisting to the engineer. "It's my car, isn't it? Why should I wait till tomorrow?"

"Your father will be very disappointed if you don't wait till tomorrow and use it then, on your birthday, for the first time," urged the engineer.

But the man, young Tom Dryer, only shrugged.

"I want it tonight. And what I say goes around here. Wheel it out."

"But——"

"Wheel it out, I tell you!"

The engineer shrugged. He got into the roadster, after taking off the shrouding canvas. A side door of the laboratory opened. He drove the roadster out and onto the cinder driveway leading from the fenced factory grounds.

"Boy, that's a job!" said Tom Dryer, his too bright eyes taking in the lines and power of the machine. He got in behind the wheel. The motor boomed.

"So long."

The young man waved his hand to the engineer, and drove off. The watchman at the yard gate barely had time to open the portals for the flying thing. Then young Dryer was out and off.

The engineer shook his head. His face was pale.

"So long," the boy had said. And it seemed to the older man that the words, and the parting wave of the hand, were prophetic. The farewell given for a long trip. A long, long one, perhaps.

"Drunk, and at the wheel of a thing that will go nearly a hundred and fifty miles an hour," the engineer whispered to himself. "I certainly hope——"

He turned back into the experimental laboratory without finishing the sentence.

AN HOUR later, at a little after midnight, the great new roadster fled like a silent, tremendous night bird over the open highway. Swaying a little behind the wheel was young Dryer. Beside him sat a girl with unnatural-looking red hair, and predatory gray eyes set in a face as flawlessly regular—and as uninspiring-looking—as a beauty on a magazine cover.

"Seventy," said Tom Dryer. "And you don't feel it any more than if you were going twenty. Wait till we hit an open stretch! I'll show you speed, baby!"

"Let's be satisfied with seventy," urged the girl. She was a little pale under her rouge as she glanced from the speedometer to his face.

"Don't be like that," laughed the boy. "That's an old maid's speed. I want to show you what this buggy can *do!*"

The girl was silent for a moment. She moved restlessly in the seat.

"Say," she exclaimed finally, "do you feel funny?"

"How do you mean?" said Dryer.

"Kind of itchy and nervous," said the girl.

"Nope."

"Well, I do. And my hair feels like—like it was being pulled by someone. I don't like it. And I don't like going so fast on a road where you're apt to go round a corner and meet a car piling toward you."

"Like this?" laughed Dryer, steering around a curve on the wrong side of the road with screaming tires. "Hang on, kid! This is a straight stretch ten miles long. Bet we can make it in five minutes."

The needle went to eighty-five.

"Tommy," shrilled the girl. "Don't, please! I—I feel——"

"Hang on!" Dryer repeated, shouting over the rush of wind. "You'll never have another ride like this!"

The needle went to a hundred.

"Tommy!" shrieked the girl. "I—oh, *God*——"

The night was split by a violet flare that could be seen for miles. Like concentrated lightning it burst forth, shattering the darkness along the road.

It blazed into being with no warning, persisted for about a half-second, and died as suddenly.

And on the road, where the great roadster had been, with a man and girl in it, was nothing. A charred black streak showed. That was all.

3. *Satan Schemes*

IN A tower suite of the Book Hotel next noon, two men sat talking.

One, thin, of average height, with thin gray hair and eyes lidded by colorless flaps that looked like the membranes veiling the eyes of a bird of prey, was president of the Universal Motors Corporation, Detroit's biggest automobile combine. The other was Ascott Keane, criminologist.

Keane got up from his chair and paced slowly back and forth across the room, his wide-shouldered, athletic body moving with the perfect muscular co-ordination of a trained athlete. His gray eyes were like chips of ice in his lean face. His black brows were drawn low.

"There is only one person on earth who could possibly be responsible for this," he said.

Corey, president of Universal, stared up at him. His veiled eyes looked more than ever like the eyes of a bird of prey—but of a very frightened bird, now. But even in his fright, he preserved his business caution. So many men, these days, claimed knowledge to which they had no right—and tried to extort money from you on that claim!

"Who is that?" he asked, warily.

"Doctor Satan," said Keane.

Corey sighed and leaned back in his chair.

"You are right. I guess you know the answer behind the—the disappearances, as you claim to do. The voice that spoke to me ended by insisting that its owner was somebody with the bizarre name, Doctor Satan."

Keane stared at the man. On Keane's face was a trace of impatience. He had read the man's thoughts, and didn't like them. But Corey, wealthy and powerful as he was, was only a pawn in this game. And one doesn't become annoyed with pawns.

"Tell me about the voice," he said.

Corey swallowed with difficulty. His face went greenish.

"I was in my office. The office is sound-proofed, so that no voice could have come from outside. I was alone—even my secretary had been sent out—and the door was locked. I sit alone like that often when I want to think out a problem. And while I was sitting there—a voice came to my ears.

" 'You have heard the news,' the voice said. 'You have heard how Charles Besson, and Thomas Dryer, son of Dryer the motor magnate, were consumed in a mysterious violet flame.' "

Corey looked at Keane like a terrified child.

"It was almost like the voice of a second self speaking! It came so unobtrusively and—and naturally—that for a minute I wasn't startled at all. But then—I was. I realized that there wasn't a soul but myself in that locked, sound-proof room. A voice—save mine—*couldn't* sound in there! But this one did; a rasping, arrogant, metallic kind of voice. It went on:

" 'You are thinking of that news now. You are planning how best to take advantage, in a business way, of the fact that Besson had died suddenly, and that Dryer is stunned and helpless from the blow of his son's death.'

"That—that was true," Corey blurted out. "It was as if someone was reading my mind——"

"Someone was," Keane murmured. "Go on."

"Well, I *was* thinking about the business advantages that might accrue to Universal by the tragedies. Any man would." Corey shivered. "The voice said:

" 'You have more important things to think about now. One is—your own life. Another is, how you can arrange your financial affairs so that you can take ten million dollars in cash from your fortune. For that is the price of your life. Ten million dollars. You will deliver it to my servant within the next few days, or you will die as Besson and Dryer died. I swear that, and Doctor Satan has never broken a vow.' "

Corey gnawed at the back of his bony, prehensile hand.

"Those aren't the exact words, but that's the message given by the voice. And that was the name: Doctor Satan. I'd have said the whole thing was some clever trick, played by a master at hypnotism or ventriloquism to cheat me out of money. I'd have defied the orders of the voice, of course—if it hadn't been for the awful way in which Besson and Dryer's son died. My God, can anyone really do that—consume people in violet flame—at will?"

Keane shrugged.

"According to the newspapers and many witnesses, someone can. What do you intend to do?"

"I don't know. That's what I came here to ask. I had about decided to pay, when you phoned. How did you happen to get in touch with me, anyway, at such a crucial moment?" A bit of the

old wariness and business suspicion came back to Corey's face.

Keane smiled.

"The moment I read, in New York, of the inexplicable tragedies that had happened here, I flew to Detroit. Both victims had been prominent in motor manufacturing circles, so I looked for the next one. Your name is first on the list of prominence here, so I began with you, intending to run down the list of executives till I found one who had been threatened. I knew who was behind the crimes, and I know something of how he works, so my course of action was outlined for me. You told me you had been threatened; I asked you to see me—and that's the answer."

Corey sighed.

"Shall I pay this Doctor Satan? Ten million dollars! It's colossal! But life is more important than money——"

"Even if the price asked was only ten cents," snapped Keane, "you shouldn't pay it."

"But he'll kill me! The flame——"

Keane's long jaw squared. His firm mouth became firmer, grimmer.

"I've fought this man more than once," he said. "I've beaten him before. I'll do it again. Don't pay. Your life will be saved—if you take one precaution."

"And that?" said Corey eagerly.

"Don't ride in a car. In fact, don't ride in anything capable of high speed: bus, train, anything." He glanced toward the door, indicating that the interview was over. "If you refrain from that, you'll be all right."

Corey went out. The door opened after his exit, and Keane's secretary came into the room. Tall, lithe, beautiful, with dark blue eyes and hair more red than brown, she stared at her employer with a look in her eyes that would have revealed much to him had he been gazing at her at the moment instead of looking unseeingly out the window at the roof-tops of the automobile city. Beatrice Dale's feelings for Ascott Keane were apparent to everyone—save Ascott Keane. Marvelously astute in all other matters, in this one he remained singularly obtuse. And it appeared that he always would!

Beatrice sighed and came up to him.

"You have found out how the deaths were caused?" she asked, professionally, with the glow hidden in her eyes

Keane nodded absently.

"I have found out several things. Not exactly, in detail, but closely enough to map out my plans.

"Doctor Satan is up to his old methods of harnessing the forces of nature to do his crimes for him. It was nature that killed Besson and Dryer's son. Static electricity.

"Both Besson and young Dryer were notoriously fast drivers. Very well, Doctor Satan contrived a method of generating and storing static electricity in enormous amounts. Probably the generating was done by the wheels themselves, turning at fast speeds. The electricity was stored in some small device that wouldn't be noticed if examination was made of the car before it was taken out. When a voltage was built up that would be far beyond any amount that could be registered on any recording instruments yet devised, it exploded the storage device—and utterly consumed car and occupants and everything else. That is the only thing that would explain the violet light told of by the witnesses. In a way, a natural death. But a gruesome, fearful, spectacular death—which would so horrify and cow other motor manufacturers that they would give Doctor Satan anything he asked rather than risk the same fate themselves."

"Horrifying and fearful enough," breathed Beatrice with a shiver. "Ascott

—you have escaped the other deaths this fiend has invented. Can you escape this? For of course he'll turn the new weapon on you, too. More than anything else on earth, he wants to get rid of you. He'll try to kill you as soon as he learns you are here."

Keane laughed a little, without humor.

"As soon as he knows I'm here? My dear, you underestimate him. As surely as we live and breathe—he knows that now!"

At twenty minutes past noon a man in the dungarees of the Union Airlines mechanics turned off a sidewalk into the yard of a factory. It was a small factory, two stories high, less than an eighth of a block square. Its windows were boarded up. The yard was grown with weeds.

A man sat in the open doorway of the deserted-looking building. He was an elderly man, poorly dressed. His faded blue eyes stared straight ahead with curious blankness. His face was stubbled with three days' growth of grayish beard.

The man in dungarees came up to the doorway. A small, monkey-like fellow with a mat of hair over his face through which peered small, cruel eyes, he hopped as he walked in an oddly animal way.

"Is anyone in?" he asked the watchman.

The watchman's faded blue eyes did not move. They continued to look straight ahead as he sat there like a statue.

"Yes, sir," he said.

"How many?" asked the man in dungarees.

"Two, sir."

The watchman's lips moved like mechanical things. He looked and acted like something actuated with springs and wires.

The little man in dungarees shivered a bit. His pale eyes narrowed with an emotion that might have been fear. He walked past the watchman, who did not move a muscle, and into the factory building.

It was dark in here in spite of the noon daylight outside. The reason was that the entire inside of the first floor was draped closely in heavy black fabric, which also stretched from a frame crossing in front of the door, so that the door could be open innocently and yet outside eyes could not see in and detect the black drapes.

The little man passed under the door drape. He entered the dark interior, which was dimly lit by red electric bulbs so that it resembled a corner of some weird inferno.

Over a bench on which was a glistening small receptacle about a third the size of a cigar-box, a figure bent which was like something seen in a fanciful illustration of hell: a tall, gaunt figure draped from head to heels in a red robe, with red gloves shielding the hands, and a red mask over the face. Even over the head of the figure, red had been draped: a skull-cap, from which protruded two Luciferian horns in imitation of the horns of the Devil.

Next to this eery figure was the body of a legless man—gigantic torso supported by calloused, powerful hands.

"Girse," said the imperious, red-draped figure, without turning its head.

The little man in dungarees drew a quick breath. The red figure had its back toward him. It could not have heard his soft entrance. Yet, as though it had been facing him, that entry had been noted.

"Yes, Doctor Satan," he said.

"Report, please."

Girse hopped closer in his monkey-like fashion, and stood next to Bostiff, the legless giant. From under the voluminous dungarees he drew a flat leather case.

"Miller, the truck manufacturer, did as you ordered," he said docilely to Doctor

Satan. "Here are thirty checks, of one hundred thousand dollars apiece."

Doctor Satan's coal-black eyes glowed from the eyeholes of the red mask. In them was glacial triumph.

"It is well. You got into the Union Airlines hangar?"

"I did," said Girse, his pale eyes glinting.

"You attached the storage cube?"

"I did, with the wire leading to the propeller, and with fins attached to the propeller blades."

Unholy satisfaction glittered in the coal-black eyes. Then it was dimmed, and the light of rage glowed there.

"It will be as we wish it—unless Keane discovers it in time."

"Keane—is here?" quavered Girse.

Bostiff spat out an oath, his dull eyes red with fury.

"He is here," grated Doctor Satan. "I gleaned that from the mind of Corey. He is here, in Detroit. And Corey has seen him and was advised not to meet my demands. That was foreseen—which is why you attached the storage cube to the propeller. He is in a tower suite at the Book Hotel, with his secretary Beatrice Dale. And he is daring to match his wits against mine once more."

Icy murder flared in the coal-black eyes. The red-gloved hands closed slowly, quiveringly.

"This time, Ascott Keane dies! This time I will get rid of the one obstacle between me and unlimited power, through fear, over the minds of men."

He turned back to the bench, with his red-gloved fingers delicately adjusting tiny, fine plates of some substance like mica which packed the interior of the small metal container on which he was working—a container like that which had been attached to the sedan of Besson and the roadster of young Tom Dryer.

"With Keane out of the way," he grated, "I could be supreme on earth—and I will be!"

4. *The Voice of Satan*

THE late evening papers gave the news of Doctor Satan's latest blow against the ancient law: Thou shalt not kill. Beatrice Dale brought the paper in to Keane, who was about to go out, and handed it to him without a word.

Keane read the account, then crumpled the paper in a grim hand.

"Corey dies in unique plane accident," the item was headed. And across half the front page was spread the account:

> This afternoon at four o'clock Mr. H. C. Corey, president of Universal Motors, was killed in an airplane accident twenty miles out from the Detroit landing-field.
>
> Mr. Corey, called on urgent business to New York City, chartered the plane for himself alone and took off at three-forty. The plane circled the field once, then headed east. Twenty miles from the field it exploded.
>
> Union Airline officials have no explanation to make. The explosion, according to eye-witnesses, was accompanied by a violet flame, which is not the type of flame resulting from gasoline explosions. . . .

Keane drew a deep breath.

" 'Called on urgent business to New York City,' " he quoted. "The fool! He committed suicide. Doctor Satan gave that call, of course. And Corey, fearing financial loss, disobeyed my orders. I told him not to ride in anything capable of speed."

He went toward the door.

"I'm going to Besson's home," he said to Beatrice. "I want a talk with Besson's chauffeur about the sedan the man was killed in. I'll be back in an hour."

CARLISLE, Besson's chauffeur, bit his lips as he faced Keane in the cool dimness of the great garage.

"I suppose I should have gone to the police about it," he said unsteadily. "But I couldn't see what good that would do them, and I knew I'd get in a lot of trouble over it."

"Tell me more exactly what happened," Keane urged.

"Well, at a little before seven o'clock, I was in here washing down the town car. Mr. Besson came out and asked if the sedan was ready. I said yes, and he got into it——"

"You're sure it was Besson?"

"No, later I realized I couldn't be sure," Carlisle admitted. "I heard his voice, and I'll swear it *was* his voice. And I saw his back, and he was wearing a checked suit as he usually does. But I'll have to confess I didn't see his face."

"Girse," murmured Keane. "Made up as Besson—with Satan himself speaking in Besson's voice from a distance. . . ."

"What?" said Carlisle.

"Nothing. Go on."

"That's about all. The man I thought was Mr. Besson went out, with a bag and everything as if on the Cleveland trip, and then came back in about half an hour. I didn't see him return—I only heard the car drive in and went down and found the sedan. The first I knew something was wrong was when Besson called, half an hour later, asking if the sedan was ready for his trip! I thought he'd gone crazy, then."

"You have no idea where the sedan was driven in that half-hour?" said Keane.

"None at all," said Carlisle. "And now, of course, no one will ever know. Because there isn't any sedan to look over any more."

Keane's lips compressed.

"There's no sedan, but I think we can find out where it went in that fatal half-hour. Have you cleaned out in here recently?"

Carlisle looked at the floor of the garage and shook his head.

"We haven't kept up quite the schedule we usually do since the boss—died. The garage floor hasn't been swept——"

"Good," said Keane. "Where did the sedan stand in here?"

Carlisle indicated the space nearest the end wall. Keane went there, bending low, critically examining the concrete.

"The man drove it back into this spot before Besson took it out?"

Carlisle nodded. Keane got to his knees.

There were slight flakes of dust and dirt from a car's tires on the floor. Keane took up some of these and put them carefully in an envelope. He turned to go.

"Shall I tell the cops about this?" said Carlisle, white-faced.

Keane shook his head. "It would get you in a lot of trouble, as you said. And I don't think it would do any good. You can't be blamed for being fooled by the man who killed your employer."

He went out, with the chauffeur's thankful and admiring gaze following him.

At the curb before the Besson home was the coupé Keane had hired to get about the city in. He got in behind the wheel and headed for the near-downtown section.

He was on his way to the laboratory of a friend of his. In New York he had his own laboratory, vastly better than the one owned by his friend; but he hadn't time to send to New York and he thought the friend's equipment would be sufficient enough to perform the task he wanted.

As a man will do sometimes, Keane broke his own strict rule—disregarded the very warning he had given Corey: not to ride in anything capable of speed.

In a hurry to get the scrapings of the sedan's tires analyzed, he drove like a black comet along the boulevards; drove that way till suddenly his hair began to feel as though it were standing on end and every nerve in his body tingled and rasped with exasperating sensitivity.

His face paled a little then. With his lips drawn back to show his set teeth, he jammed down the brakes of the car.

"Static electricity!" he whispered to himself. "The devil! Does he think he can get *me* that way?"

He opened the hood of the car.

Attached to the underside of the dash was a metal container. From it led a fine wire. The wire went to the fan whirling at the front of the motor. And to the fan-blades fine fins of some flexible, colorless stuff had been attached.

With a savage jerk, Keane ripped the wire loose from the metal box. But the box itself he detached carefully to take home for further study. He knew that the secret of the violet explosions lay in that box; a secret consisting in what possible manner of substance could act as a storage battery for static electricity and store the stuff till an explosion point was reached.

With Doctor Satan frustrated and his life no longer in danger, Keane went on to his friend's laboratory and presented the tire scrapings for analysis.

"Mixed in with the normal dirt of the streets," the friend reported a little later, "there are two substances which might tell you where the car has been. One is a trace of cinders, such as is to be found in many factory yards. The other is a powdered chemical which turns out to be a special kind of lime fertilizer."

"So?" said Keane.

"So this," replied the man. "There is only one plant in Detroit which manufactures that particular type of lime fertilizer. That is a plant out on Jefferson Avenue." He gave the address. "It is at least possible that Besson's sedan was driven near the plant during its half-hour absence and picked up a little of the fertilizer, spilled on the street from trucking."

"And the trace of cinders?"

The man shrugged.

"That particular company does not have cinder surfaces in its yards. I telephoned to find out. They must have come from somewhere else."

Keane thanked him and went out. His light gray eyes were glittering, his firm mouth was a bleak slit in his face. Cinders, and dust of a fertilizer made only in one spot in the city! He thought that should provide a trail to the spot in Detroit where Doctor Satan lurked like a human spider spinning new and ever more ghastly webs.

He went to the Book Hotel, to study the shining metal container he'd got from his dash, and try to penetrate its secret, before making the next and last move that should bring him face to face with Doctor Satan himself.

But the study was never to be made. Fate was not to allow him the time.

At the hotel desk he told the clerk to ring Miss Dale's room and ask her to come to his suite with notebook and pencil. His phone was ringing when he opened his door.

"Miss Dale is not in her room, sir," the clerk reported.

Keane's eyebrows went up. Then they drew down into heavy, straight black lines over his light gray eyes as apprehension began to gnaw at his brain.

He went to the room in the tower suite which he had set aside to use as office and workroom.

"Beatrice," he called, looking around for the quietly beautiful girl who was more right hand to him than mere secretary.

The room was empty. So were the other rooms.

With the apprehension mounting to chill certainty in his mind, Keane looked around. He found his hands clenching and sweat standing out on them as his

quick imagination grasped the significance of her absence.

An exclamation burst from his lips. Half under the desk in his temporary office he saw a glove. It was a tan glove of the type he had seen Beatrice wear last. Just the one glove.

Near the door, now, he saw the other. . . .

"My God!" he whispered.

Beatrice had gone out of the hotel. That was a certainty. But—she never went out ungloved. It was one of her fastidious habits. Yet there were the gloves she wore with the brown street costume she'd had on when Keane left her. . . .

His head bent swiftly, and a terrible fear leaped into his eyes. A voice had sounded.

"Ascott Keane," it said—and it was hard to tell whether it was an actual voice or a thought making itself articulate in his own brain. "You escaped the death waiting for you under the hood of your coupé. You shall face death later at my hands, in spite of that. But before death comes for you, you shall have the pleasure of imagining, as you are doubtless doing now, the lingering fate that shall be dealt out to your able assistant, Beatrice Dale. I have her, Keane. And when you next see her, if you ever do, I'm afraid you'll be unable to recognize her."

There was a low, icy laugh, and the voice ceased.

"My God!" breathed Keane again.

And then he was racing from the room, with agony in his heart but keeping the agony carefully walled off from the cold and rapid efficiency with which his keen mind could work in times of great emergency.

"There is only one plant in Detroit which manufactures that particular type of lime fertilizer," his laboratory friend had said. "That is a plant out on Jefferson Avenue. . . ."

Keane got into the coupé, wrenched the wheel around, and pressed the accelerator to the floorboard as he sped out Jefferson Avenue.

5. *Living Death*

KEANE went straight to the plant from near which the tires of Besson's sedan had picked up the significant trace of fertilizer. There he paused a moment outside the high wire fence enclosing the company's grounds. But he hesitated only a moment. There were no cinders in that yard, as the laboratory man had said. And the sedan had been some place where cinders had paved a space. Also the company grounds were swarming with workmen. No one could drive a car in, tamper with it, and drive away again unnoticed.

He started on away from the plant, and farther away from the center of town. There was only the one direction to go in. The sedan, to have picked up the fertilizer trace, would have had to go beyond this point.

He drove very slowly, examining intently the properties on each side of the street. But it was only with an effort that he kept himself from driving like mad, senselessly, aimlessly, so long as he covered a lot of ground in a hurry.

Beatrice. . . .

Never had he had such urge for speed —but speed did no good when he didn't know where he was going.

Beatrice. . . .

"I have her, Keane. And when next you see her, if you ever do, I'm afraid you'll be unable to recognize her."

That was what Doctor Satan had said. Where in God's name was she? And what was Satan planning to do to her?

He bit his lips, and kept the coupé down to a speed at which he could scan

the buildings he passed. And then he started a little, and lowered his head rapidly and drove by the place that had attracted his attention. The place was perfectly innocent-looking. It was a small factory less than fifty yards from the sidewalk on the left-hand side. But two things had riveted his attention.

The first was that the grounds around the factory were cinder-paved. The second was that the place was abandoned, with boarded-up windows and an air of desolation.

An abandoned factory, in a not-too-populous part of the city. . . .

Keane got out of the coupé and walked back a half-block. He saw that an elderly man, patently a watchman, sat in the open side-doorway of the factory.

He hesitated an instant, then walked openly toward the man. He couldn't have hidden his approach anyhow, and thought he could overpower the watchman if his suspicions of the place were verified and the man tried to give an alarm to others inside.

His eyes fastened to the watchman with increasing curiosity as he approached. He saw that the man was cheaply dressed, with faded blue eyes and a stubble of grayish beard on his face. And he saw that the eyes stared off and away in the oddest, most unseeing way imaginable. Also he noticed how unmoving the old man was. He sat in the doorway like a statue, not shifting his position in any way. Even when Keane had come quite close, he did not move.

Keane stared down at him with growing grimness. He could see the man's pulse beat in the vein in his throat; but it seemed to him that the pulse-beat was incredibly slow. He could see the hair of his stubble of beard closer; and it appeared that the flesh of the man's face had receded from the hair-roots, more than that the hair itself had grown.

Keane felt a chill touch his spine. Realization, like a spike of ice, began to sink into his brain. But he still could not quite believe.

"Hello," he said to the man, in a low voice.

"Hello," the man replied.

He said the word with his lips hardly moving, and with his eyes staring blindly straight ahead.

Keeping his voice almost in a whisper, so that it could not be heard through the open doorway in which the man sat, he said:

"Are you alone here?"

"There are—four inside," the watchman replied, creakily.

Keane moistened his lips.

"What is your name?" he asked.

"It is——"

The man stopped, like a run-down machine. His faded, unblinking eyes stared straight ahead.

Keane stopped, then. He touched the watchman's wrist, and shuddered.

Perceptibly he could feel a pulse, beating perhaps twenty to the minute. He could see the man's chest rise and fall with immensely decelerated breathing.

Pulse, and breathing. And the man could speak and, up to a point, answer questions. But that man was dead!

Keane dropped the wrist, icy as something long immersed in water. His lips were a thin line in his face. A dead man on guard! A watchman whose presence here would be missed, and who therefore had been left in his accustomed place so that passers-by would have no suspicion that anything unusual was taking place inside!

He had found Doctor Satan. The presence of a living dead man where a live and vital human being should be, proclaimed the fact like a shout.

Keane drew a long breath. Then he stepped past the dead man, who sat on

with faded blue eyes staring into space. He entered the doorway. His eyes, accustoming themselves to the darkness, detected the presence of the black drapes swathing the interior and making of it a smaller room-within-a-room. At the same time his ears caught an arrogant, glacial voice—a voice that made the hair on his neck crawl with remembrance and primeval fear. The voice of Doctor Satan.

Edging his way along between the drapes and the wall, careful to touch neither, Keane moved to a spot where the harsh and imperious voice sounded farthest away. Then he took out a knife, slit the black fabric, and looked through.

THE first thing his eyes rested on—was Beatrice Dale.

She sat on the floor of the abandoned factory with her slim arms down by her sides, and her silk-sheathed legs out in front of her. Arms and legs were bound; and a gag was around her lips. Over the gag her eyes stared out, wide and frightened, yet, in the last analysis, composed. Keane felt a hard thrill of admiration for her fortitude go through him as he looked into her eyes.

Over her bent the figure he had seen before several times in the flesh—and many times in nightmares. A tall, gaunt body sheathed in a red robe, with a red mask covering the face and a red skull-cap over the hair.

Keane bit his lips as he noted the knobs, like horns, that protruded from the Luciferian skull-cap. Those mocking small projections were the keynote of the character motivating Doctor Satan. A man who took pride in his fiendishness! A man who robbed and killed, and broke the laws of man and God, not for gain, because he already had more than any one person could spend, but solely for thrills! A being jaded with the standard pleasures of the world, and turning to monstrous, sadistic acts to justify his existence and give him the sense of power he craved!

Next to the red-robed figure, Keane saw Doctor Satan's two malevolent henchmen, Girse and Bostiff.

Girse, small and monkey-like, was gazing at the girl's form with his pale eyes like cruel beads in the hair covering his face. Bostiff, supporting his giant's torso on his calloused hands, swayed back and forth in a sort of dull ecstasy.

Again Doctor Satan's voice came to Keane's ears.

"I have not yet decided what I shall do with you," the harsh voice pronounced. "You are beautiful. I am alone in the world—and it is not inappropriate that Lucifer take a consort. But that consort should not be a mere living woman such as lesser beings have. You noticed the watchman as you were borne into this place?"

Keane saw a spasm twitch Beatrice's face, saw her eyes wince with terror.

"I see you did," Doctor Satan said. "And I see you sensed his state. A dead man, my dear—yet a man who will breathe and move in a sort of suspended animation as long as I shall will it. A man whose automatic reflexes can still dimly function, so that the dead brain may direct the muscles of throat and lips to answer verbally any questions not too complex, and so that the body may move to orders not too difficult."

Doctor Satan's grating, inhuman laugh sounded out.

"It comes to my mind," he said, "that Lucifer might here find a fitting mate. The devil's consort—death. A beautiful woman who must answer as required, and who must move without question to fulfill her master's least demand. That would be unique—and amusing. Think how Ascott Keane would react to that."

Keane, motionless behind the drape, with his eye to the slit in the fabric, felt perspiration trickle down his cheeks. The man was diabolical. He was beyond madmen in the aims he pursued and the goals he achieved. Yet he was not mad. That was perhaps the most hideous part of it. He was sane. Icily, brilliantly sane!

And now Doctor Satan went on with that in his voice which made Keane suddenly tense in every muscle as instinctive small warnings prickled in his brain.

"The reactions of Ascott Keane to that spectacle. . . . Very interesting. I must see them. In fact—*I will see them!*"

Like a flash of light the red-robed body whirled. The coal-black eyes of the man glared through the eyeholes of the red mask—glared straight into the eyes of Keane, pressed to the slit in the black fabric.

Impossible that he should see Keane's eyes in the dim red light of the black-shaded room! Impossible that he should have heard Keane breathe or move! Yet he knew the criminologist was there!

For a moment that seemed an age, Doctor Satan's glittering black eyes stared into Keane's steely gray ones. Then the red mask moved with words.

"You will come here, Ascott Keane."

Keane's legs moved.

Savagely he fought the muscles of his own body, which were like relentless rebels in the way they disobeyed the dictates of his will. But the muscles won.

His legs moved. And they bore him forward, like an automaton, so that the black drapes moved forward with him, slithered over his head, and sank back into place behind him.

He walked up to where Doctor Satan and Girse and Bostiff ringed the bound, helpless girl. There he stood before the man in red, eyes like steel chips as they glinted with savage but impotent fury.

"Will you never learn, Keane, that my will towers over yours, and my power goes beyond yours?" Doctor Satan crooned.

Keane said nothing. He looked at Beatrice, and saw that into her eyes had crept a horror that went beyond the fright that had entered them at mention of the living dead man who guarded this red-lit inferno.

He could feel his body responding sluggishly to the commands of his brain, now. But the recovery was feeble. He could not have moved toward Doctor Satan to save his life, though with every fiber of him he craved to throw himself on the man and rip the red mask from his face and batter that face into a thing as unhuman in appearance as its owner's soul was in reality.

"Girse," said Doctor Satan.

That was all. The little man hopped in obedience. He came close to Keane with his right hand hidden behind his back.

Keane gasped and tried to throw his arms up as he read in the little man's mind the command Satan had wordlessly given him. But his arms moved too slowly to prevent the next act.

Girse lashed forward with his own arm. Something glittering in his right hand pressed into Keane's flesh. He felt a sharp sting, then complete physical numbness.

He sank to the floor. But though his body was a dead thing, his mind continued to function with all its normal perception.

Doctor Satan's glacial laugh rang out.

"The great Ascott Keane," he sneered. "We shall see how he meets his own fate —and that of his efficient secretary, toward whom his secret emotions are not quite as platonic as his conscious mind believes."

He turned to the little man.

"Girse," he said again. That was all.

The rest of the command was unspoken. But all too clearly, with the telepathic powers that were his, Keane caught that too. He fought in an agony of helplessness to make his body move, as Girse hopped toward Beatrice. But he was as immobile as though paralyzed.

Again Girse held a hypodermic needle, but this was a larger one than the one he had plunged into Keane's body.

WITH his pale eyes shining, the monkey-like little man pressed the needle into Beatrice Dale's bound left arm. The girl closed her eyes. A strangled moan came through the gag that bound her lips. Keane croaked out an oath and struggled again with a body as limp and moveless as a dead thing.

"The drug in that hypodermic is quick-acting," Doctor Satan said. "Observe, Keane."

With starting eyes, Keane saw how true the words were.

Into the girl's eyes already had crept the terrible, unseeing look that characterized the faded eyes of the thing outside in the doorway. He could see the pulse in her throat slow down. Slower . . . slower. . . .

"She's dead, Keane," said Doctor Satan emotionlessly. "Though, dead, she will obey better than alive. Girse."

Once more the monkey-like small man approached the girl. In his hand was a knife. He slit the bonds that held her, and removed her gag.

"Come to me, Beatrice Dale," commanded Doctor Satan.

Through a red haze, Keane saw the girl get to her feet, slowly, unsteadily. She walked toward the figure in red, moving like one asleep.

"You are mine, Beatrice Dale," Doctor Satan said softly.

There was a perceptible hesitation. Was the girl's brain, even in death, struggling against the monstrous statement? Then her lips moved, as the lips of the thing in the doorway had moved, like the lips of a mechanical doll.

"I am yours."

Keane panted on the floor. He could not even cry out. His vocal cords were numbed by the drug, as was the rest of his body.

Doctor Satan stared down at Keane.

"And so, my friend," his harsh voice grated out, "we see the end. Your aide has become—as you see. You yourself shall presently die as Besson and Dryer and Corey died. The end. . . . Bostiff."

The legless giant hitched his way forward on his long arms.

"The flywheel, Bostiff," Doctor Satan said. "Girse, attach the cube of death to Keane."

And now Keane glanced at a thing he had seen only perfunctorily, and noticed not at all, until now: On a length of rusty shafting in the rear of the factory room was a big flywheel, which had performed some power service when the factory was busy. To this was belted an electric motor.

Bostiff hitched his way to the flywheel. As he went, he trailed behind him a fine wire only too familiar to Keane; the kind of wire that had led to the metal box Keane had detached from his coupé before death should strike him. To the spokes of the flywheel, Keane knew, were fastened the colorless, unobtrusive fins which generated the static death that had struck down the motor millionaires.

Girse fastened to Keane's chest a metal cube which had been resting on a low bench near by. Bostiff fastened the other end of the wire leading from it, to a point near the flywheel. Then he started the motor.

The big flywheel started turning over. Doctor Satan's eyes burned down at Keane.

"In five minutes, approximately," he said, "there will be a violet flare. In that flare, you will be consumed. Just before it occurs, the drug that holds you will begin to disappear, so that you shall be the more keenly aware of your fate. We shall, naturally, wait ouside till the bursting into flame of the building announces that you are no longer alive to annoy me."

He turned toward the dead girl. "Come, my dear."

Beatrice walked toward the draped door, her body swaying a little from the impairment of her sense of balance, her eyes staring unblinkingly ahead. Doctor Satan followed. Behind came Girse and Bostiff.

Doctor Satan raised the drape. The three passed through ahead of him. He stared at Keane.

"Four minutes now," he said. And then he followed the others.

6. *Two Metal Cubes*

KEANE was lying so that he could see the watch at his wrist. He watched the little second hand fly around its circle three times. He listened to the whirring of the great flywheel, gathering static electricity through its fins; such a colossal store of it as even the lightning could not rival—to be held in the mysterious metal cube on his chest till it had gathered beyond the cube's power to contain it any longer. Then the cube would be consumed, and consume everything around it like a tremendous blown fuse. . . .

Keane stared at the watch. He had a hundred seconds of life left. One hundred seconds. . . .

But his counting of the seconds was not actuated solely by the fear of death. His mind had never been keener, colder than it was now. Ascott Keane was waiting for the first sign of returning movement in his muscles. When that occurred he had a plan to try. It was a plan the success of which hinged on facts unknown to him. But its steps seemed logical.

He felt burning pain in his finger ends, then in his hands. Grimly he moved his fingers, searing with returning life. He flexed his hands. He had forty seconds—perhaps a little longer, perhaps a little less, for Doctor Satan could not foretell to the second when the static force stored in the metal cube should burst its bonds in the terrific violet flare.

Now he could move his right arm feebly from the elbow. He dragged it up by sheer will till it went to his coat pocket. In that coat pocket was a factor—or a possible factor—which Doctor Satan had not reckoned with: the metal cube with its broken end of wire, which Keane had taken from his coupé for analysis which he had not had time to make.

He got the cube from his pocket. His watch told him he had twenty seconds, a third of a minute, to live.

With maddening slowness, his hand moved. It found the wire from the box in his pocket. With numbed fingers it pressed the broken bit of wire to the other cube. . . .

The fifteen seconds that passed then were an age.

Keane's idea was that with two of the storage cubes hooked together, it would take twice as long for the spinning flywheel to generate the static force that was presently to consume him. As simple as that! And, even though he knew nothing of the substance in the cubes capable of storing the force, he thought its action must be as logical as it was simple.

If it took minutes longer for the building, with Keane in it, to go up in violet flames, Doctor Satan might come back to see what was wrong. . . .

The zero second approached, passed. Keane held his breath. Ten seconds

passed, and still death did not strike. The flywheel turned, the gathering static electricity rasped his nerves and stood his hair on end, but the violet flare did not dart toward the heavens.

Twenty seconds went by, and Keane breathed again—and watched the draped door. He could move arms and legs now, and a bath of flaming agony told that all his body would be soon released from the grip of the paralyzing drug.

Two minutes had gone by before he saw the drapes at the door move. And then—Girse came in. Girse! Not his master! But Girse, Keane thought, would do.

The monkey-like little man came into the red-lit room, and to his merited end. Keane's steely eyes were on him. Through them, as through shining little gates, his iron will leaped at the man.

Girse stiffened in the doorway. Then, in obedience to Keane's unspoken command, he walked to Keane's side.

"You came to see why the violet flame has not burst out?" Keane said.

"Yes," said Girse, his wide, helpless eyes riveted on Keane's.

"Doctor Satan is outside with Bostiff and the girl?"

"Yes," said Girse. A spasm passed over his hairy face, as though apprehension struggled with the deep hypnosis in which he was held.

"Answer this," snapped Keane, "and answer it truly. The girl, Beatrice Dale, is now dead. Do you know of a way to make her live again?"

God, the agony that went into Keane's waiting for that answer! And then Girse's lips moved.

"Yes."

Keane drew a deep breath. He was standing now, tottering a little, but almost entirely recovered.

"What is the method? Tell me quickly—and truly."

"The drug that killed her is its own antidote. More of it will bring back to life any who have been dead for not more than half an hour."

"Thank God!" said Keane.

And then he acted. And as he did so, before his mind ran the list of crimes this man, with Doctor Satan as his leader and the unspeakable Bostiff as his comrade, had committed. The list took all pity from his face.

He fastened the two metal cubes to the man whose body was held in his mental thrall. Then he went to the door, backing toward it with his commanding eyes ever on Girse.

The flywheel turned with a monotonous whirring. The fins attached to its spokes sent down the fine wire the accumulation of current. Millions, billions of volts, filling the mysterious storage capacity of the first cube, reaching toward the capacity of the second.

KEANE looked at his watch. In thirty seconds, if Doctor Satan were right, the two cubes should explode with double the violence planned on. . . .

There was a violet flare that seemed to fill the world. Keane was knocked backward out of a doorway that an instant later became nonexistent.

A glimpse he had of a man who sprawled over and over with the force of the shock and then relaxed to lie at last in the actual death hitherto denied him. The dead watchman! Then he was staring into coal-black eyes that glinted with a fear that never before had touched their arrogant depths.

"Keane!" whispered Doctor Satan, as the criminologist faced him. "You weren't . . . then it was Girse. . . ."

"It was Girse who died," said Keane—and sprang.

With a pleasure that sent a savage

thrill to his finger-tips, he got his hands around the red-swathed throat.

"The drug that made that girl as she is," he grated. "I want it."

Doctor Satan's voice gurgled behind the red mask. His hand went under his robe. The fear of death—that exaggerated fear felt by all killers when they themselves feel death approach—gleamed in his eyes. He drew out the big hypodermic.

"How much is the reviving amount?" grated Keane.

"Two . . . calibrated marks . . . on the . . . plunger," gasped Doctor Satan as Keane's fingers relaxed. "The same as . . . the lethal dose. . . ."

"Death, or renewed life, the same," whispered Keane.

Then a bleak smile shaped his firm lips. He took the hypodermic.

With the swiftness of a leaping serpent his hand moved. And death poured into Doctor Satan's veins!

Keane slowly got up. The coal-black eyes faded. They became dull splotches through the mask's eyeholes.

Keane shot the stated amount into Beatrice's white arm. There was barely enough. With his heart in his throat he watched her reactions.

"Thank God!" he whispered.

Color was slowly seeping into her cheeks. Her eyes blinked, then began to lose that deathly dullness. The pulse increased toward normal in the throat vein.

Keane turned toward Doctor Satan and his face wore the same grim look it had worn when he left Girse to his merited destruction.

"Get up," he said.

Slowly, stiffly, Doctor Satan rose. His dead eyes peered straight ahead.

The factory building was a solid blaze. Shouts and sounds of running feet announced the beginning gathering of a crowd in the street.

"Walk straight ahead—and keep walking," Keane snapped.

The red-clad figure, like a dread automaton, walked straight ahead—toward the roaring flames. Keane waited, with bleak victory in his tired eyes, till the figure was on the brink of the flames. Then he turned to Beatrice.

"What?" she faltered.

He helped her up.

"Don't talk. Just come with me," he soothed. And, in answer to the look in her eyes: "Doctor Satan? He's dead at last. In the flames. It's triumph for us."

He helped her to the curb and through the milling crowd to his coupé. . . .

It was the first major mistake of Keane's life.

"Two calibrated marks on the plunger," Doctor Satan had said was the reviving dose of the drug. "The same as the lethal dose. . . ."

The revival amount had been correct; Beatrice was alive again to prove it. It did not occur to Keane that Satan might have lied about the other.

So he did not see the red-clad figure draw back from the flames as soon as he had turned and started leading the girl from the cinder yard. He did not see Doctor Satan crawl behind a rusted pile of metal tanks, nor see, a moment later, a figure clad in conventional dark clothes emerge, leaving behind it a red, Luciferian costume that would have been too conspicuous to wear where many could observe.

"Victory," he said again, with shining eyes, as he drove toward the hotel.

But near the blazing factory behind him and Beatrice a tall figure drew itself up with quivering fists and muttered:

"I swear by the Devil, my master, to avenge myself on Ascott Keane for the death of my man, Girse, and the humiliation I myself have this day felt at his hands!"

The Hand of Wrath

By E. HOFFMANN PRICE

A weird orientale, about a shriveled hand that was severed from the fierce old Sultan's arm—and the strange doom that animated it

"*IT IS a tale they tell of the old days, Sidi, long before the land was infested with British Residents, and Russian agents, and other infidel dogs—saving your honor's presence! It is a tale of the great wrath of Zahireddin Mahmud, whose vengeance even death could not thwart.*

"*But first you must know that the remote ancestor of Zahireddin was Timur, who succeeded in all that he attempted; and though thinned by time, the blood of Genghis Khan's successor still ran fierce in the veins of Zahireddin. Yet greatness was not written on his forehead, and his only fortune was a stout heart. His mother's brother and his tall, bearded cousin pursued him from the scant remainder of his heritage; and his troops had forsaken him, since it is profitless to follow an unlucky captain.*"

Ferghana was in flames, a red, vengeful glow in the yawning blackness of midnight. The drumming of pursuing hoofs had died out to a faint mutter; but few and halting and broken were those who still kept faith enough to persist in flight.

Zahireddin reined in his foaming, winded horse, wheeled about, drew his stained, nicked blade, and faced those few whose hearts were stout as his own. The treachery of kinsmen, having corroded him but for a day, had not yet made his mouth grim, but the drooping black mustaches hinted at its final direction. His nose was straight, and not the commanding beak of the conqueror. Only the implacable resolution of his slightly slanted eyes bespoke the iron heritage of that young man whose chain-mail and spiked helmet had all that night turned aside the weapons of former friends.

All was gone—so Zahireddin could laugh, and sit erect in his blood-splashed saddle. His men slouched, and their beasts hung weary heads. For a long moment the captain of that battered remnant of the guard confronted his chief, eye to eye.

"We can not clear the pass, my lord," he said at last. "We are weary and wounded, and our horses are sinking beneath us. Our bowstrings are soggy, and our arrows are nearly gone. Our armor is ragged as the cloak of a darwish, and the sword's haft turns in our frozen hands."

The captain's eyes and the eyes of his men shifted as the steel-hard, narrowed eyes of Zahireddin measured them, man by man. The silence finally cried for words, so the captain spoke.

"Where would you go, *ya amir?*" he muttered. "The world and the Uzbeks are your enemy. The mountains and the night are your slayers."

Zahireddin knew that his men had pronounced a doom. There was a shifting of uneasy horses, and a stirring of haggard men, the sodden jingling of curb chains and mail, scabbard, and quiver. But the captain had not yet wheeled his horse about.

"My head is worth a helmet full of Uzbek gold," mocked Zahireddin. The

"A hand was shaping out of the satanic glamor."

mockery of his voice lay in its softness, and the friendliness that was a reminder of past comradeship. "Take it with you. The Uzbeks will pay . . . and my cousin will pay them."

The battered captain neither paled nor flushed in that bitter moonlight. His head dropped lower, and his red spurs sank into the frozen sweat that caked the flanks of his horse. The beast lurched left, as though something of wood had been scourged to sluggish life by one of the Tartar devil-doctors of the north.

"Allah is thy protector," mumbled the captain. And as an apologetic afterthought, a touch of Persian courtesy to smooth the path of desertion, he added, "We return to hold the pass of Koh-i-Zend—to cover your escape toward Samarcand."

The captain's horse stretched weary legs to overtake the retreating guard. The iron bitterness of Zahireddin's heart crackled in a metallic laugh. He lifted his blade in salute, whipped it sharply to its scabbard, and turned to the slender, muffled figure that bestrode the horse at his side.

He saw that the slant-eyed Tartar girl was smiling. He called her Jauhara be-

cause her name was beyond the limit of a tongue attuned only to Turki and Persian. He remembered the Tartar blood of Timur, his remote ancestor, and smiled back at the long-lashed eyes and golden skin of Jauhara. And then the bitterness returned a hundredfold. Zahireddin shook his head and said to the night, "The blood of the Last Conqueror is thinned by time . . . those whipped dogs would have followed him to the uttermost, slaying until they were hacked to pieces. Me they desert."

"Twenty to one, my lord, and yet they feared to take your head for Uzbek gold," said the Tartar girl. "All is not lost. There is still vengeance. And vengeance waits at the head of the pass."

VENGEANCE. The thought flamed in his weary brain. Zahireddin was young, and it was his favorite cousin who led the pursuit. He saw that Jauhara's smile was carmine in the frosty moonlight, and that there was neither fear nor doubt in her eyes. He dropped the frozen reins. His lips moved soundlessly as he counted on his fingers, "Ahmad Shah . . . Mirza Abbas Khan . . . Nadir Ali the Lion . . ."

When he completed the tale of traitors, he saw that Jauhara no longer smiled, but regarded him as though she were a bewildered child. He wondered if he had spoken aloud. Then he wondered what she had seen in the darkness to make her smooth golden features suddenly become so grave, and her wide eyes stare so far beyond the shroud of darkness. It seemed for an instant that the girl saw more than he possibly could see; and he forgot for a moment that he was Zahireddin Mahmud, Amir of Ferghana, and asked, "Which way?"

Jauhara started, smiled, and gestured toward the ominous red glow far to the rear, the red glow of looted Ferghana.

"From there, in any direction," she replied. He laughed grimly at the gallant gesture.

"Vengeance?" he wondered.

"Vengeance," she affirmed.

Zahireddin gathered his weary horse, and they began the ascent into the black, frosty desolation of the impassable saber-slash that pierced the mountains and led at last toward the gates of Samarcand—golden Samarcand, where Timur, the last conqueror, had once reigned.

"But even though we conquer the pass," reflected Zahireddin, "death waits in Samarcand, where Uzbeks guard the gates. . . ."

But Zahireddin was weary of slaughter and futile flight. He was past pondering, and it relieved the surging, roaring fires of his brain to follow for a while, since he had vainly led. There is nothing more futile than a captain whose stout heart has cracked. It made little difference where Jauhara led. The Amir remembered that Tartar women are versed in charms and spells, but he knew that no magic could deflect the hungry blades that lurked along the road. He wondered again what Jauhara had seen in the darkness to give her the faith to speak of vengeance; and then he dismissed all queries.

THE trail became strange, and difficult beyond measure. Zahireddin's horse floundered, sank, struggled to his feet, then fell, not to struggle again. The Amir disengaged himself, shouldered his Boukharan saddle-bags, and seized Jauhara's stirrup, to stumble along as best he could.

Zahireddin, who would saddle a horse to ride a hundred paces, marched on foot. He laughed bitterly and said aloud, "How much lower can the race of Timur sink?"

The girl did not for a moment answer. Then she roused herself, sat erect in the saddle, shuddered from the cold that bit

like Turki arrows, and said in a low voice, "Vengeance will be your next horse, Zahireddin. And vengeance is not sweet save it be dredged from dregs. Therefore walk, Zahireddin, so that you will never forget."

Zahireddin understood. In his weariness of heart and from the battering of his soul Zahireddin's consciousness had expanded, so that he saw that it was fitting for him to walk rather than to double the load which weighted the Tartar girl's exhausted horse. It was even fitting that Zahireddin the Amir should walk while a woman rode.

Jauhara was now strangely silent. Zahireddin again wondered what she saw in the blackness that crowded to the edge of the narrow trail. Once she shuddered, and swayed in the saddle. But the night had become a madness, and Zahireddin feared to touch the Tartar girl. She had promised vengeance out of the dregs of defeat, and it was not fitting that Zahireddin should lay hands on one who had become possessed. A thought burned in his brain for an instant, and he was afraid. Then Jauhara recovered, sat erect again, and murmured in a low, strained voice, "Walk yet awhile, Zahireddin. Vengeance burns around the corner."

It was as she said. From the darkness came a feeble, reddish glow as of a fire smoldering behind a rock. And then from the frosty granite and its mantle of implacable snow he saw the irregular, low-arched mouth of a cavern and wondered what enemy awaited within.

The Tartar girl, however, seemed to know. She slid lightly from the long-limbed horse that had followed Zahireddin's black stallion through that hacking, arrow-riddled rear-guard action. She strode to the mouth of the cavern and saluted an old man who squatted beside the dull red glow of coals. She spoke, and he answered in the language of the far-off Tartar tribes. Zahireddin understood but dimly. It was scarcely worth understanding.

Fierce, narrow eyes at last shifted from the girl's face and regarded Zahireddin, who saw that the cave-dweller was seamed and wrinkled and leathery, with a scanty, straggling wisp of a beard; skin like smoky parchment was stretched over high cheek-bones; and his nose was wide and flat. A devil-doctor, a *shaman* from High Asia—but it made little difference to Zahireddin, until the hermit began to speak, and pronounced a word that aroused the Amir.

"I will give you vengeance, young man. One by one you will overtake them, flay them alive, and impale them in the public square. All, that is, save one."

Zahireddin was not grasping; yet he could not but wonder which that one might be, and what would be his fate.

"That one," said the hermit, "you must die to slay. You have your choice. But is vengeance worth the cost?"

"Mir Abbas Khan . . . Nadir Ali the Lion . . ." And thus he named them, one by one completing the tale of wrath; but he paused at the name of his cousin, Ahmad Shah.

"Neither steel nor fire can touch you until vengeance is complete," the old man said. "No pomp and no power can be denied you, neither the arms to smite nor the men to overwhelm them, one by one. You who have walked tonight will ride tomorrow. But the last vengeance you will not live to see."

Zahireddin had believed Jauhara—why doubt the hermit? In that abyss of despair nothing seemed more incredible than that the descendant of Timur should walk. And then Zahireddin saw a compromise, and reckoning swiftly to himself, he thought, "Flay all but that one, then hold my hand until old age overtake me . . . and the last vengeance will

be none the worse for being deferred . . . it will give a purpose to my life, and be a monument at my death . . . *ay, wallah,* I will cherish that last vengeance. . . ."

It may be that the hermit read the silently moving lips, or perhaps the very thought of the Amir. He smiled craftily; and for a moment Zahireddin trembled. It seemed that shapes and presences were lurking in the shadows beyond the fire; and the fumes of that red smoldering had become acrid and stifling, dizzying and overwhelming. Yet through the reeling of his senses Zahireddin saw that it would be foolish to die so that the last traitor's hide would be nailed to the gate of some city perhaps not yet finished. To die slaying him, hand to hand—that would be only the day's work of any man; but there was something unspeakably evil and uncanny in that old man's promise, so that it seemed rather a threat. It savored of a trick. Like all else it was a madness and a mockery. The weariness of his body and the ache of his wounds and the batterings that his spirit had endured that day made all save oblivion seem vanity: and to make the choice that the hermit demanded was too much for one who again stood before a warm fire, and was once more sheltered from the Turki arrows that had rattled like hail against his armor.

ZAHIREDDIN's eyes shifted to catch the eyes of the Tartar girl. Whether it was Tartar magic, or woman's intuition, she had led him far from the pass that the pursuit would follow, and had cheated someone of a bag of Uzbek gold. He saw that her golden skin had become pale, and that her face was tense, and her lips a thin line. And even as he regarded her, she swayed, and but for his supporting arm would have collapsed. Zahireddin then noted what he had not thus far suspected: he knew now what Jauhara had seen in that darkness into which his last troop of horse had retreated. Jauhara had seen death. She had mocked the arrow that had drunk her life, and had led the way to vengeance before that red froth which now trickled from her lips surged forth once too often and choked her.

For an instant the slanted Tartar eyes focused clearly on Zahireddin, and she smiled as she had in those pleasant gardens of Ferghana. The turquoise and jade pendants of her head-dress mocked the pallor of her cheeks. The too-red lips murmured, "Vengeance, Zahireddin. The old man will tell you the way. He is one of that brotherhood of adepts from High Asia. Do as he bids——"

Her voice was clear and unfaltering to the last abrupt stop. Then as Zahireddin knew that Jauhara was dead, he turned to the leather-faced hermit and made his choice: "To the end and to the uttermost, old man. My uncle's son, Ahmad Shah, led the pursuit. It was one of his archers——"

The old man smiled bleakly and nodded. Perhaps Jauhara had told him whose archers had aimed so well.

"Bury her in that clearing some dozen paces from the entrance. There are loose rocks not yet sunk in snow. Then return, Zahireddin, and I will make you Lord of Vengeance, Lord of the Conquering Wrath."

The red lights that flickered in the old man's narrowed eyes burned into Zahireddin, and for an instant frost raced through his veins, and thunder muttered in his ears, and he trembled at facing the knowledge that he had met destiny at the crossroads. He had learned how fearful it is to hold fate in one's hand, to know that one can bind or loose, slay or spare, master of destiny, and writer of doom.

It was still his to accept or reject. Fi-

nally he forced his fascinated eyes aside and saw the Tartar girl; and seeing, he no longer dared fear. He stooped, gathered Jauhara in his arms, and stalked into the bitter night.

Presently Zahireddin returned, empty-handed and lonely, incredulous, and corroded by the last poisonous drops of treachery. Far down in the pass he had seen a long line of blackness against the snow, heard the clank of steel and the mutter of troops on the march. They were pursuing along the road they were certain he must have taken.

"I am here with my choice," he said to the hermit. "Therefore do that which is to be done before I ride on the road of vengeance, to overtake the forgotten of God!"

"IT IS written how Zahireddin, single-handed, by craft and by stealth and mountain-madness looted a caravan; how, single-handed, with gold and steel he beguiled and slew until at his back he had a troop of men who knew that that iron-hearted lad would ride far. That much is written, and more also, concerning the cities he plundered and the thrones he took—and then there is that which my grandfather's father told me of the wrath of Zahireddin Mahmud, whose vengeance not even death could thwart."

One by one he rode them down, those kinsmen of his, until Zahireddin became the very self of vengeance. Mir Abbas Khan's still live body stirred most of that first day it lay redly in the rubbish heap not far from the gate to which the soldiers had nailed his hide; but Nadir Ali the Lion they did not flay, for in fighting with the savagery of his race there remained unbroken not enough skin to be worth the stripping. . . .

But Zahireddin devised fittingly to account for that exception; and those who saw contend that the doomed man must have envied his predecessors.

One by one he rode them down, and with each hunting the power of Zahireddin increased; but there was one who evaded him. That one was Ahmad Shah. At first Zahireddin raged and redoubled his efforts; then, bit by bit, the memories of that night of despair and that old hermit's juggling, jingling words returned to the Amir, and he began to doubt that those contradictions could have meaning. And pomp and power at last seemed good; so that in the end Zahireddin let vengeance slumber, and saw no reason why a middle-aged ruler should rack his brain about the hide of his one surviving renegade kinsman.

And when wrath at times did reawaken, Zahireddin recollected what the hermit had whispered into his ear, and his weather-beaten, sharp features lengthened perceptibly. Keep that last vengeance as a goal. . . .

Zahireddin's hair was now white, and so likewise his scanty, straggling beard. The skin that stretched in a hollow curve from his high cheek-bones to the craggy line of his jaw was like the leather of an old saddle. His fingers, from gripping of reins and buckler, sword-haft and bow-string, mace and wine flagon, had become talons that could no longer entirely straighten; and since he limped from an arrow-shattered ankle that had healed awry, all eyes were averted when he hobbled from his throne to the saddle in which from force of habit he still spent most of his waking and many of his sleeping moments.

There was much that Zahireddin had learned in these fierce years, and much that he had forgotten; yet there was also that which he remembered. In town or in camp, there was always at his side a Tartar girl whose turquoise and jade pendants tinkled as she patted her tall coiffure and

looked up to smile at that fierce old man whose one remaining eye still burned with undimmed fire. The girl's name was Jauhara. She was the last of a succession of Tartar girls, each of a certain age, and each of whom Zahireddin had for a while called Jauhara, which in the language of the Koran means *"a jewel"*, but to Zahireddin had come to signify *"vengeance"*.

The years had blown away the ashes of burnt-out desires, and the redness of ancient wrath glowed bright again; for Jauhara reminded him of what an aging Sultan might otherwise have forgotten. He questioned her incessantly concerning the lore of her people, for Tartar women are versed in charms and spells.

Yet in the end it seemed that Zahireddin must have learned things that no Tartar girl, and certainly not Jauhara, could have taught him: and it befell as the old hermit had said.

THE end came with the reawakening of drowsy vengeance. Ahmad Shah still lived, and the white-haired traitor spoke of friendship. Zahireddin took the field; and golden-skinned, oblique-eyed Jauhara accompanied him, even as, years ago, another Jauhara had left pleasant gardens to ride at his side. The vast, closed curve of time was doubling back upon itself, and despite the forty-two great scars that seamed Zahireddin's leathery skin, it seemed that his memories had prevailed over his age.

One day's march separated him, finally, from Ahmad Shah; and then camp fire and guard fire marked that day's end. Swift as the falcon's stroke—swift as the cheetah's lunge—and Ahmad Shah was trapped. Nothing but the morrow's battle remained; and that would start long before dawn, and be a rout at sunrise. Ahmad Shah could neither withdraw nor push through.

"Vengeance and the day of Vengeance, O Lord of Vengeance. . . ." The slant-eyed girl sang one of the hundred verses that Zahireddin had composed in Persian to the great wrath. Then she paused for breath, and drained a flagon of Shirazi wine at a single draft, as was the old Tartar custom: and Zahireddin drained two.

It is exceedingly doubtful that the wine was poisoned, or the savory stew, or the lamb grilled over a bed of coals; but the pastries drenched with honey, or the apples, may have contained the bitter crystals that froze Zahireddin's muscles into rigid cords, so that his fists clenched and his face set in a hideous grin. His back arched like a bow, as if in the end his heels might touch the back of his head.

Zahireddin knew the symptoms, and so also did Jauhara: and the physicians were not vain enough to speak of antidotes. The sultan had swallowed a doom; and from afar came the pulsing of drums that mimicked the pounding heart of Zahireddin.

The poisoner's art is such that no man knows who struck him; yet Zahireddin had knowledge that comes from more than the senses, and he was certain that Ahmad Shah, hunted for forty years, had at last struck back; that some spy had achieved what the traitor's maneuvering could not.

"There is neither might nor majesty save in Allah, the Great, the Glorious," intoned Zahireddin in an interval between the convulsions that racked his lean old body. He knew that it would be hours before he died; he knew that there was no doubt that he would die; and the drums that muttered reviled him from afar.

Vengeance had deserted Zahireddin. Fear stalked through the encampment. The great captain's illness was a guarded secret; yet within the hour that exultant army was muttering of retreat rather

than of loot. And all the while Zahireddin's mind remained crystal-clear in the paralyzing grip of that poison. Not one shade of perception was dulled by anguish. He began to envy those whom his red vengeance had utterly destroyed; and he wondered at the misery in Jauhara's eyes until he realized that it was but the shadow of that which was tormenting him.

"Mirza Abbas Khan . . . Nadir Ali the Lion . . ." He counted them on his fingers, one by one, as a thousand deaths closed in upon him, span by span. Jauhara at his side and all those other Jauharas had become one with that first Tartar girl who had fled with him from Ferghana.

She seemed again to smile at him from the shadows, and murmur something which at first Zahireddin could not quite understand, despite the clarity of his senses. He listened, straining his ears, so that finally in the intensity of concentration he shut out the thunder of distant drums and the surging of his own roaring pulse. And then at last he heard.

Zahireddin heard, and understood. . . .

Then as in a blaze of light he saw that only the last Jauhara was beside him, and that the grizzled, fierce old man beside the fire was no hermit but Temuchin, his favorite captain of the guard; and that he, Zahireddin, was in a silken pavilion and not a smoky cavern.

Zahireddin was fully alive and aware again. He knew what must happen before he died and won freedom from all vengeance. And yet the poison had come upon him so swiftly, and the convulsions had ravaged him so fiercely, that thus far he had not been able to speak of the ultimate retribution. He no longer dared move, lest the least exertion bring the terrific spasmodic contractions back again; but finally he forced his lips to take soundless forms, and shape words without disturbing the delicate balance of poisoned nerves and poisoned body.

The most trivial gesture reacts to affect every other nerve and tendon and muscle; and when the balance has been upset, the lift of an eyelash could start the deadly convulsions anew. But Zahireddin conquered.

JAUHARA and the old captain watched and read the silent command. Temuchin muttered and shook his head.

"He can't mean that! He's out of his head——"

But Jauhara knew otherwise. She knew that one so close to death must be wise and sane and gifted beyond those about to mourn him. Thus she drew the crescent-bladed simitar from its tattered, shabby scabbard. It was an old blade without a single jewel to grace its haft of carved bone; and endless honing had narrowed it, and almost obliterated the line of Kufic script that ran from guard to point. Temuchin's incredulous eyes sought the haggard eyes of his chief, and read affirmation. He accepted the ancient blade, tested its balance—then flung it ringing against the rocks that cropped up in a corner of the pavilion.

"No, by Allah!"

"Then I will," declared the Tartar girl as she retrieved the simitar. It was marvelously light for the slaughter it had wrought. It was a thin, warped moonbeam, remorseless, and hard as that old man who in the face of death still drove his will toward vengeance.

Zahireddin's lips twitched, perhaps from poison, perhaps from striving to smile. Then he forced them to articulate.

"Let her strike, Temuchin. And obey her as you would me—she knows."

As he spoke, he extended that slender, corded arm, worn by strife and age to bone and sinew and leathery skin. The talon-fingers were clenched for an instant.

Zahireddin forced them to open. Then the deadly tetanic convulsions seized him.

"Strike!" he cried in a great voice. Only that, and no more. His face froze in a hideous grin, and corded muscles struggled to burst through the parchment skin. Zahireddin's tense body was arching, like a crescent standing on its two horns; and he lay there on his heels and the nape of his neck, rigid and frozen. Yet by some wonder of will, that right hand resisted that terrific contraction.

Time had ceased in that silken pavilion. Jauhara swayed for an instant. Old Temuchin wondered if her Tartar courage could fail as his own had. The Boukhariot hangings still trembled from Zahireddin's last command. The girl's crimson lips were now a thin, straight streak, and her cream-hued hands had become white. . . .

And then the slender body made a single fluent motion. That curved sliver of steel for an instant seemed a part of her rippling swiftness; shearing so fast that its gleam was untinged by the blood that followed the severed right hand of Zahireddin to the Herati carpet. . . .

ZAHIREDDIN was dead, and his face was not good to see. His lips were set in a grin that made the Tartar girl and the grizzled captain wonder if the Sultan truly was dead. No living thing could be so malignant of expression. For a long time the gray-bearded Temuchin and golden-skinned Jauhara regarded each other.

"Why?" he at last demanded. "Was that some . . . some old magic?"

He could offer no other reason. He hoped that there was some other; and he knew that madness was not the answer.

"No, Uncle," said Jauhara. Her eyes seemed permanently to have widened, and at times she glanced curiously at her hands as if she still wondered whether they could indeed have severed Zahireddin's wrist.

"Then why?"

"Because he wished it;" then, after a long silence: "And maybe he was planning a sending. He used to question me, hours at a time, about the magic of my people. But what could I know of the *true* magic? And he died just before he expressed—something which none of us can ever know. Had he lived only another moment, he might have told me. I could not have heard, but I could have watched his lips."

"But you struck?" said Temuchin.

"Yes. You heard his voice. It was like a war trumpet. It was more important for me to strike than to know. He had but few words left in him. And you disobeyed his first command, and wasted a word," she reproached. "But I knew that a doom was on him—so I struck."

Temuchin nodded. He was abashed at the reproof. Then his face became stern.

"Nevertheless there is this matter of vengeance. Ahmad Shah, may Allah not bless him, surely poisoned the master. Those drums prove it—prove that he knows that he is saved. And there is no one to avenge Zahireddin. In the morning, this army will be a flying rabble. And in the evening, what will remain of the splendor of Zahireddin?"

"What of yourself, Uncle?" wondered the girl. "And those others who have risen with him?"

"Too old for vengeance," he said. "We have outlived our days. For us there is no retreat. Ahmad Shah will hunt us down, for the sake of his kinsmen whom Zahireddin tracked to their death. So we will thwart him by holding the rearguard, and dyeing our beards in blood while the others ride toward the border."

"It will be a rout?" wondered Jauhara.

thinking of the brave show of that army at sunset.

"What else could it be? They will miss Zahireddin's voice. He will not be raising his voice above the ring of steel and the braying of horns and the rumble of hoofs. They will wonder why he fails to lead them into the red mist of the morning—and so of course there will be a rout when the *bimbashis* lead their troops to the attack."

Jauhara's glance shifted to the grinning terror that lay on its heap of rugs. That one eye was glassy, and mocking as the distorted face. It challenged her to divine what Zahireddin would have ordered, had he lived but a moment longer, and what reason he would have given for striking off that right hand.

"It seems," she mused, "that that sword-stroke was more important than anything else. It is as though he knew that that done, all else would follow. And his last thought was of vengeance. . . . Temuchin, his friend, will die in the morning—and that will leave——"

Jauhara knew what the answer was, but she dared not pronounce it, lest its weight crush her slender body.

"Get me a horse, Temuchin," she finally said, "and a safe-conduct out of our lines. Ahmad Shah will sit on a throne tomorrow. I will be the only one left. So I will find vengeance. I will take that severed hand with me, and in the end I will know."

As she waited, Jauhara wrapped Zahireddin's hand in a silken scarf.

"Years ago," the Tartar girl said to the silence of the pavilion, "this one-eyed slayer was a handsome boy. He must have loved that first Jauhara. Maybe I reminded him of her. And it seems only fitting that I should finish what she began. . . ."

JAUHARA escaped. And the following morning, secure in the hills, she watched the rout of the army that once was Zahireddin's pride. Then for a while she watched a copper kettle suspended over a bed of coals. She had a plan which required that the hand of Zahireddin be preserved until the day of vengeance; and racial memories, and old legends, and lore gathered among the people of the hills combined to tell her what to put into the copper kettle so that her memento of the lord of vengeance would in the end serve its purpose.

When at last she descended to the lowlands, she learned that the capital had of course been sacked, the leading merchants strangled and their goods confiscated, and the outstanding adherents of the dead Sultan impaled; and that done, Ahmad Shah did his best to appear accustomed to the throne he had won at the wrong end of his life.

"Bring me the head of Zahireddin," he commanded. *"Ay, wallah!* Bring me his entire body, and I will buy it, weight for weight, gold coin against that unclean carcass. His carcass, all or any part of it —publish the orders at once, Ulugh Bek!"

And it was so published.

But the piecemeal clause caused certain wo. Ahmad Shah was suspicious when he noted that the severed left leg submitted for inspection was that of a man much younger and more swarthy than Zahireddin; and when by unhappy coincidence a second left leg was brought into the Presence, and also offered as that of the late Sultan, Ahmad Shah suspected fraud, and impartially crucified both claimants.

"Change that order, Ulugh Bek!" he ordered, catching the eye of his chief *wazir*. "The entire carcass, and I will buy it, weight for weight, in silver bars."

And that, forthwith proclaimed, became law.

Before three days had passed, a squad of Uzbeks had found and looted the grave in which Zahireddin had been buried that disastrous night, and dragged their gruesome plunder into the presence of Ahmad Shah to have it weighed and redeemed in silver. All was well until the Sultan noted that one hand was missing.

"Dogs, and fathers of many pigs!" he protested. "What fraud is this?"

"Protector of the poor, this is the very body of Zahireddin," the Uzbeks declared.

"But not *all* of it. Read them the law, Ulugh Bek."

And thus, since a hand was missing, the executioners began erecting in the public square a stake for each culprit, and one, loftier than the others, for the body of Zahireddin. For while Ahmad Shah quibbled about the lack of a hand, he could see no good reason for failing to defile the body of his cousin by surrounding it with a handful of grave-looters. But before either the Uzbeks or the corpse were impaled, a woman demanded audience of the new Sultan. She was unveiled, after the Tartar custom; she was uncommonly lovely; and, though Ahmad Shah did not know it, she was Jauhara, vengeance-bent.

"My lord," she said, "those Uzbeks are innocent of any offense. They had the hand of Zahireddin, but it dropped from the bundle before they reached their destination. I picked it up."

It seemed auspicious to Jauhara that she should arrive at a moment so suited to furthering her device. In the several days that had followed the death of Zahireddin, Jauhara had pondered, and out of her intentness she had at last shaped a portion of the words that Zahireddin had failed to speak; and seeing how the hapless Uzbeks had paved the way for her approach, she was certain that her search would not be vain.

"But how," wondered Ahmad Shah, regarding the parcel which Jauhara was unwrapping, "did the hand of Zahireddin come to be swathed in silk?"

"Allah," responded that dark-eyed girl, "is most knowing."

"Praised be His name!" intoned Ahmad Shah, grateful for the poisoning of his cousin. The several Uzbeks hopefully echoed the sentiment. But when Ahmad Shah scrutinized the severed hand, the expression of his wrinkled, crafty face became severe and dubious.

"This," he asserted sourly, "is not the hand of a man as old as Zahireddin."

His contention seemed painfully in order. There was a murmur of regret from those about the throne. It was exceedingly unhappy that a girl as attractive as Jauhara should be impaled. And the Uzbeks squirmed in unpleasant anticipation. Jauhara, however, was not perturbed; for she saw that a blind, unwitting current was surely leading her toward vengeance, and she knew that Zahireddin had truly known.

"Allah upon you, O King! But this is indeed the hand of Zahireddin. Look how the callouses and markings of the palm most perfectly fit the markings of the haft of Zahireddin's simitar, which I perceive those Uzbeks brought in with the body."

Ahmad Shah saw that the girl was right. It never occurred to him to wonder at such acute observation; and Jauhara knew that stupidity was the advance-guard of doom. Zahireddin in the agony of death had foreseen.

The Sultan signaled to the executioners to desist from their preparations, then frowned, and for an instant closed his eyes.

"But how can this thing be?" he final-

ly demanded. "One hand lean and shriveled, the other fresh and plump, as of a young man."

"That is more easily demonstrated than explained," said Jauhara. "And so that no one can learn the secret by hearing my explanation——"

She handed a folded slip of paper to a *wazir* to offer to Ahmad Shah. Court etiquette did not permit her to offer it direct; and thus the jade-hafted daggers whose slim blades were thrust as pins through Jauhara's high-heaped blue-black hair could not yet reach Ahmad Shah. But Jauhara knew that the few lines written in Persian were piercing as Turki arrows:

"Someone, my lord, has made preparations for the ritual known as the Breaker of Seals, whereby hidden treasures are revealed, and the dead are commanded to speak; and this severed hand is essential to the ritual, and serves in a peculiar fashion, being fuel for an unholy fire, and affording light for the reading of certain words that cause the revealing of revelations and the appearing of apparitions: and the late Sultan's hand is peculiarly efficacious in compelling him to expose his own concealed treasure. Which is an ancient tradition, and one which I learned from my father's grandfather. . . ."

VENGEANCE wears many masks; and Jauhara's plan changed a dozen times in as many hours. But she knelt, at last, on the sand-strewn floor of an inner room of the palace that once had been Zahireddin's, seeking with flint and steel to strike light to a pinch of tinder. Barred arches high above the floor cleft the massive walls and let sift into the solemn darkness a thin shaft of moonlight; and against the wall, squatting cross-legged, crouched Ahmad Shah, eager, and covetously watching the beginning of the ritual that required flame uncontaminated by any previous use.

The preparations were being made in secret, lest following the revelation of wealth come its enforced division among the captains who had exalted the usurper. Ahmad Shah was not yet certain enough of his throne to risk refusal, and he was too grasping to postpone the ritual of the Breaker of Seals. And thus the nearest sentry was several barred doors beyond the inner room; but as she fanned the tinder to a yellow, aspiring thread of flame it seemed that Jauhara had been thwarted from the beginning. It had been so subtly done that she could not know whether it was by design or hazard that during the hours in which she awaited Ahmad Shah's leisure her slender, jade-hafted daggers had disappeared: so that she knelt there, empty-handed—and beside her, the severed hand of Zahireddin.

Jauhara felt terribly alone in that vaulted room whose sculptured cornices leered down at her. Even hope was gone, and only that poisoner, that father of treachery, remained.

"By Allah, if this gray-bearded dog escapes me," she said to herself, "the very hand of Zahireddin will throttle the breath from my body. And that first Jauhara will revile me—that first Jauhara who mocked death until her work was done—and done in vain, if I fail the Lord of Vengeance."

Then she unwrapped the silken scarf, and took the curiously prepared hand and set it upright in a small vase so that the pottery embraced the stump of a wrist, and the five outstretched fingers were as the branches of a candelabrum. The fingers of Zahireddin were now transparent and plump, and Ahmad Shah marveled anew; but Jauhara, who knew what embalming waxes and gums and spices caused that filling out of tissue felt no wonder, but only despair. Nevertheless she plucked a brand from the brazier and touched it to

Zahireddin's fingers, one by one; and each finger-tip exhaled an answering flame, unquivering, and spectral blue. The gums and essences which had preserved the hand of Zahireddin made grotesque corpse-candles of the fingers: and then Jauhara dropped sand into the brazier, extinguishing the fire she had kindled, so that only the blue tongues of flame illuminated the vaulted chamber.

And the mockery had to continue. She had made promises, and she could not outlive her failure. Some thieving slave-girl had taken her jade-hafted daggers—and so Jauhara and vengeance would perish at one move. The poisoner was now patient and credulous: yet he would soon be disappointed and wrathful. Had she promised less, she might in the end have done more.

But there must yet be a way. Zahireddin, she knew, had had the clairvoyance of the dying. He had known that his severed hand would bring its bearer into the presence of Ahmad Shah: and knew that with that much done, vengeance could find its way. Jauhara for a moment forgot her despair, and the certainty of doom no longer oppressed her. Ahmad Shah had become wan and futile in that hideous blue glow; and curious, deathly highlights marked his nose and cheek-bones, and made his lips seem like something which has long been decaying. Jauhara shuddered, but she was no longer afraid of that poisonous old man; and in the darkness she was less alone.

AHMAD SHAH'S eyes were widening as he stared at the bluish-flaming finger-tips. It seemed that he had forgotten that he waited for her to begin reading from that old parchment she still clutched in one hand, intoning those words which would open seals, and reveal the hidden, and compel the apparition of whoever had buried treasure—and then came enlightenment which consoled Jauhara for the lack even of the slenderest sliver of steel. Ahmad Shah was stupidly gaping, hunched forward in fascinated eagerness. Jauhara remembered then the weapon which she had forgotten; she remembered that her hair was long and heavy, and that a running noose——

"Vengeance and the Day of Vengeance, O Lord of Vengeance," she murmured as she unfastened that high, blue-black coiffure, and divested it of its massive ornaments and pendants, and twisted a long serpent-strand. . . . Not strength now, but deftness. . . .

The flames were now fringed with bluish, half-luminous fumes that ascended in tall, conical miters of transparent smoke. A cloying, spicy sweetness made the untroubled air first heavy and then stifling. Despite the fascination of his staring eyes, Ahmad Shah yawned, gulped eagerly of the air as though he had not breathed for a long time. Jauhara saw him shudder, and glance over his shoulder as though someone had touched an icy blade to the nape of his neck. She was certain that he had forgotten her.

She was no longer lonely. Her heart was pounding like the drums that had throbbed from afar as Zahireddin had fought death; she knew now that Zahireddin's last command had not been vain, and that the severing of his hand had been wisdom, and the foresight of the wrath that conquers. She did not yet quite understand, but she was dimly sensing what Zahireddin had sought to tell. Not strength, but deftness—and a running noose, swiftly slipped beneath the chin—he would strangle before he could fling her aside.

Jauhara shivered as she felt the chill touch of something which made her skin tingle and her blood race wildly. Something had stroked her elbow as if to urge her forward, then had restrained her

shoulder as if afterthought had found that the moment was not yet ripe. A third presence had entered the trebly barred vault; and a vortex of power was centering about the grisly blue flames which rose from the dead fingers of Zahireddin. It seemed that immeasurable time had elapsed since Jauhara had struck flint and steel; yet the blazing finger-tips were not perceptibly consumed. The fumes were now poison-sweet and dense; and the face of Ahmad Shah was as though viewed through many veils of gauze. Mists seemed to be swirling and writhing in strange vortices, and serpentines that possessed more than borrowed life. . . .

Zahireddin had entered into the sapphire glamor to make it live with his force, and his will which even death could not thwart. Zahireddin's self had returned; and Jauhara's fear equaled her exaltation. She could no longer doubt that a running noose drawn swiftly tight was what Zahireddin had planned; for wonder was past.

But Jauhara's advance ceased before it had fairly begun. Something was drinking the power and the wrath and the exultation from her blood, and the tense, lithe muscles of her slender body became limp as the silken scarf that had enfolded the hand of Zahireddin. And Ahmad Shah's eyes, wide and staring, jerked suddenly away from their fixed contemplation of the blue-flaming hand of wrath, to center on the running noose of blue-black hair.

She knew that Ahmad Shah could not see in that spectral vagueness what she had shaped with her hand; and yet his trenchant stare had in an instant made a blue hell of that haunted vault. Her lips were too dry to cry out, and her limbs were too limp for motion: and then she saw that Ahmad Shah's eyes were focused short of her, and knew what had drunk the strength from her body.

The shimmering mists had become sentient, pulsing whorls that were gathering into masses of light and shadow. Jauhara herself had become a part of that which was materializing there in that trebly guarded chamber; and yet not all of her identity entered into that swiftly shaping vortex, for at the same time she could watch it as from without.

A hand was shaping out of the satanic glamor; a lean, hungry, wrathful hand that was calloused from years of gripping the haft of a simitar—and yet strangely, it wore an unmistakable signet, as though it was at once and unaccountably both left hand and right. It was reaching from a luminous center that came from beyond space, co-existent with and yet separate from the unyielding bulk of that curved wall.

Ahmad Shah's face moved as though he were crying out, but he made no sound. And then it seemed that he was gasping horribly for breath. Jauhara heard a crunching and a crackling. For an instant her ears had robbed her eyes—and when she saw again, she perceived that that monstrous hand had encircled Ahmad Shah's entire body rather than only the throat, as in the beginning. Time had unaccountably ceased. Jauhara knew that if that wrathful crushing did not end, she could never again regain the vital force which had been stolen from her body. . . .

JAUHARA awoke lying on the sand. Shining full in her face was the warped crescent patch of moonlight, striped by the bars of the high-arched window. The blue glamor was gone, and only a lingering, pungent poison-sweetness remained—that, and something whose shapelessness was all the more hid-

eous because it was neither quite revealed nor utterly concealed. Jauhara knew that that was what remained of Ahmad Shah; and as she bound her hair, she turned away from that shadow in the blackness. She was amazed for a moment that that which had borrowed her vital forces had been able to return enough, unexpended, to let her pass the first barred door, and the second . . . and the sentry at the third, when he saw her disheveled hair, would know well indeed that Ahmad Shah would not care to be disturbed. . . .

"Thus it was in the old days, Sidi, long before the land was infested with British Residents and Russian agents, and other infidel dogs—saving your honor's presence! Zahireddin Mahmud had learned that an amulet shaped like a hand is a symbol of power: and how much more so would his own hand be, that member which most truly divides man from beast. And he knew also, Sidi, that that Tartar girl, bearing his severed hand, would center all the will and the wrath of Zahireddin on whatsoever her own will centered. Then finally, he knew that if once he could cross the Border, he could steal from her strong, young body sufficient of the elemental substance, possessed by all creatures, to form the hand of wrath and reach from the shadows for vengeance. For it made little difference what that old hermit told him in that mountain cave, so that the will were strong and the wrath enduring: and thus spake my grandfather's father, who told me of Zahireddin Mahmud."

Ghost of the Lava

By KATHARINE BUOY

Where burnt-out lava forms a deep crevasse
  Comes echoing an eery, wailing moan
  From blackened crypts of scoriaceous stone.
A keening wind sweeps down the mountain pass,
Up-flinging powdered ashes from a mass
  Of gruesome, pulverized and calcined bone—
  Bleached human fragments—in the cinders strown
'Midst lava shards like inky isinglass.

A restless ghost patrols the haunted ground
  Of scabrous heaps of adamantine flint
Where ruthless Death stalks like a hungry hound
  Whose prowling feet leave never trace, or print—
Naught, save a sinister, despairing sound
  That permeates this land's weird monotint.

"I have been walking since then, aimlessly, trying to remember who and what I am."

The Way Home

By PAUL FREDERICK STERN

An unusual weird story about a man who found himself walking down a city street at night, in the pouring rain, drenched to the skin, his memory gone, with blind terror seizing on every person he met

IT IS still raining. Raining as though all the water of all the oceans had been sucked up into the heavens, and would all have to pour steadily down again before the rain stops.

It is not a stormy rain. There is no wind. Now and then distant lightning flares, but the flares are soft and no crack of thunder accompanies them. There is just the rain, pounding steadily down,

transilluminated now and then by the diffused sheets of lightning.

The rain is trying to tell me something as I sit here at two o'clock in the morning in this telegraph office. The way the drops sift against the broad plate-glass window, the way they trickle down the pane to converge near the bottom in many small rivers—they are trying to whisper something to me.

But I can't make out what it is.

I don't know what the message can be. In fact, I don't seem to know anything. About myself, I mean, and my place in the world.

All I know is that I, an unidentified human being, sit here scribbling on the backs of telegraph blanks in the black of early morning and try to learn something about myself.

Amnesia, I suppose. I've always rather doubted the statement that a man can completely lose his identity, due to illness, or accident, or overwork. But now I seem to be going through the same experience, and I am learning at first hand just how completely memory can leave a person.

As far as I can remember, I am only two hours old. And I wouldn't even know the time had I not chanced to see a clock in a barber-shop window at about the moment when I began to look around and observe—and remember.

Only two hours old, in actual consciousness!

It was raining two hours ago as it is now. I was on a country road, just passing a cluster of houses with a store and a barber shop among them. There was a sign at the side of the road. The sign said City Limits.

I don't know where I'd been, where I came from. Accident, illness, something, took my memory.

I'm inclined to think an accident is responsible, for I am bare-headed, and I was disheveled and dirty when I waked to memory.

Dirty? Good heavens! I was clogged with dirt, filthy with it! Not dirt, exactly, but earth. As though I'd been tossed from a wrecked car into a rain-soaked, newly plowed field.

Yet I don't remember driving or riding in any car. I remember nothing—save suddenly walking past the City Limits sign, bare-headed, with the rain gradually washing me clean.

I have been walking since then, aimlessly, trying to remember who and what I am.

The name, Justin Crowe, keeps swimming through my mind. I believe that is my name, though I am not sure. That, and my two hours in the rain, are all I know.

THOSE two hours were rather nightmarish.

I kept walking because I thought that if I did my feet might automatically take me to wherever it is I live. But they didn't. At least, if they did, I was unable to recognize the address when I passed it.

During the walk I avoided as much as possible what few people I saw abroad in the rain so late at night. Without a hat in the steady downpour, with my clothes as soaked as if I'd fallen into the lake with them on, wandering aimlessly—I knew I'd attract a lot of attention.

But it seems to me I attracted more than I should have.

That policeman I passed shortly after getting into the city proper! I thought for a moment I was going to be arrested, there.

He saw me before I saw him, I guess. Anyhow, I looked up to see him standing

in the rays of a street light half a block ahead of me, watching me intently.

I started to cross the street. But that would have looked suspicious, of course. So, after a pause, I went on toward him.

How he stared at me! He kept his head lowered a little, with his eyes peering out from under the vizor of his slicker-protected uniform cap. When I kept my head down too, I could see him stoop a bit to try to look up more squarely at my face.

He didn't try to stop me, though I was sure I would feel his hand on my shoulder. But he looked at me till I was out of sight in the steady rain. I glanced back twice to see, and I know.

It was that way with the few others I passed in the rain-drenched darkness. Without exception they seemed very much excited by the sight of me. One woman screamed a little, and turned and ran from me. Two men, of the dozen or so I walked past, exclaimed something or other aloud, and hastily crossed the street.

I suppose they thought I was drunk. That would be the natural thought when you see a bare-headed man wandering with soaked garments in the pouring rain. But would a drunken man affect passers-by quite so much?

One other theory has occurred to me. I don't like it a bit. But I am forced to consider it because of the way my presence appears to disturb people. That is, that I am some notorious bandit.

Am I, in my real, conscious life, some widely photographed public enemy? Is my face known, and feared, by all in the city? That would account for the excitement the mere sight of me has aroused in most of the people I've encountered. But—if that is true, wouldn't the patrolman have arrested me?

Certainly it is impossible for a man to be in a more miserable position than I.

I am cold.

The rain is not a particularly cold rain, nor is it the pelting, penetrating kind. Still, with no protection from it, I am cold. My fingers feel like numb sticks as I write.

I am literally soaked.

My clothes stream water in a pool on the tiled floor of the telegraph office as I sit here with the rain making a temporary wall of water on the glass between me and the chilly dawn. Soon I'll be out in it again. . . .

I am shelterless.

I don't know where I live, and I can't seek lodgings for the night because I have no money with me. In fact, I have nothing with me. Not one thing is in my pocket! Isn't that odd? Ill or well, with mind conscious or a blank, a man of forty or so, as I judge myself to be, should have *something* in his pockets. But in mine there is not one thing. Not a handkerchief, not a knife, not a coin or a key or a pencil.

I could try to beg enough for a bed, I suppose. But I shrink from the thought after the way people have acted at the sight of me. If I approached a person for a quarter, bare-headed, drenched, at this hour of the morning, that person might knock me down or run.

No, there seems nothing to do but keep on trying to find out who and what I am and where I live. Perhaps it will come in a flash at any moment.

This writing, in fact, is being done in the hope that I can identify myself.

Outside in the storm I paused before the big window of this all-night telegraph office. The sight of the piled telegraph blanks, and the pencils on their little chains, and the chairs and desks for writing, gave me the idea.

There is nothing like writing for recapturing a lost idea. Sit down com-

posedly, scrawl on paper anything that comes into your mind—and eventually you may trace your lost idea from the scraps.

That was my notion. So I came in here and seated myself and started to scribble. . . .

But I must say I have learned nothing so far. I still know only that two hours ago I was passing the City Limits sign, disheveled, dirty, bare-headed, with empty pockets. I still have no idea of my identity save that I think my name is Justin Crowe. . . .

I BELIEVE I'm going to have to get out of here pretty soon.

Since I entered, the girl and the man in charge of the place have kept looking at me suspiciously. Now they are standing together behind the breast-high counter a few feet from the line of desks where I sit. They are whispering to each other and looking at me.

I have kept my head down as I write, because the way the people on the streets acted at sight of me has persisted in my mind. The two behind the counter are trying to see my face more clearly. But for a little while longer I can probably stay here, filling one telegraph blank after another with my scrawls, trying to locate myself.

Fishing for memory! Catching at straws!

One straw is the rain, drumming on the deserted sidewalk outside, trickling in dreary rivulets down the plate-glass. I've heard that, and seen that, somewhere before. It has been recently, and it was during a crucial time in my life.

The rain! Trying to tell me something! But *what?*

The two at the counter are going to put an end to this. The girl, a slight, rather pretty blond, has cleared her throat nervously. The man, a dark-haired youngster with black cloth guards on his sleeves, is peering at me more intently.

I am keeping my head stubbornly close to the paper I write on, so that all they can see is the top of my head. But I can't sit this way all night. . . .

"Would you like to send a telegram?"

The girl has just asked me that. And I see the man's hand moving a little at the counter as though he were reaching for a gun.

"Would you like to send a telegram, sir?"

Well, I must either pretend business in here, or get out. And I can't pretend business because there is no money in my pockets. I'll simply tell my predicament and ask to stay in here till dawn and the end of the rain. . . .

I *am* a notorious criminal! An escaped killer, or a nationally known bandit, or something of the kind! It is no longer possible to doubt it.

I have just lifted my head to stare at the two and speak to them. And they acted even more bewilderingly than those I passed on the dark streets.

The girl has fainted. Fainted dead away! I heard her body thump on the floor behind the counter. And the man, with a thin, high scream, has fled. He ran toward the back of the place. I heard a rear door slam.

What in God's name am I? Public Enemy Number 1?

I could certainly loot this place, if I wished! They have turned it over to me utterly. If I am a notorious criminal, I should have a desire to loot it. But I haven't. . . .

However, a little money from their cash-drawer *would* come in handy. I could get a hotel room for the rest of the

night. Also, I will take more blanks and one of these pencils. I still have hopes that writing will ultimately turn the key of memory. . . .

The cash-drawer was locked. And I couldn't get it open. Shouldn't I have been able to break open a cash-drawer if I were a criminal?

Anyhow, I couldn't, and now I am out in the night again, sheltered from the rain in a store doorway. I am writing this against the glass panel of the door. I left the telegraph office hurriedly, afraid that the clerk would be back with the police at any moment.

I suppose arrest would be one solution of my immediate problem. In a jail I would at least have shelter for the night.

But if I am a sought-after criminal, I may get more than a night's shelter! I may get life imprisonment or the chair!

But this type of writing is doing nothing for me. It is not my intention to write of the present. I want to write of the past—what scraps I can remember—and try to place myself. However—I can't even remember scraps. What a hell I'm in!

That rain! Drumming down! Beating down! Striking in straight, windless lances, streaming over the glass of windows!

What is it trying to tell me? Where, recently, and under what significant circumstances, did I see rain streaming drearily over a window like that, and hear it drum in the hard streets? Did I have an automobile accident and skid in the rain, that it is so deeply impressed in my mind?

But I am forced to discard the accident theory entirely. As far as I can tell by feeling over myself with my miserable cold fingers, there isn't a bruise on me. I am quite thin, almost emaciated, but I am undeniably whole.

The rain . . . trying to tell me something. . . .

I AM going to have to move again. A watchman, with a raincoat glistening like burnished ebony, is coming along this row of stores trying each door in turn. He mustn't see me here, hatless, dripping. I'd be turned over to the police at once. Then—what? Relief from my homelessness for the night, and quick identification with the morning? Or a desperado's death in the chair?

If I only knew! But I can't even guess.

Another half-hour has passed. I seem to have been walking toward the outskirts of the city. (I wonder what city it is?) For the buildings now are lower, with more vacant lots between them. Behind me the rain-soaked sky is a faint bowl of light—the reflection of the many lights burning in a city even in the dawn hours. Before me is no light in the sky.

I have made no attempt to guide my steps. I have still let my feet alone, in the hope that they would follow some rut of habit buried from my conscious mind, and take me to where I belong. For the first time I have had a faint feeling that perhaps they were doing just that.

I have been walking a pretty straight path in the last half-hour—wandering in this easterly direction from the telegraph office with only a few digressions north or south. *Do* my legs know where they are taking me? Have I a home here in the suburbs? Will I recognize it if my feet, remembering more than my brain, take me to it?

During my walk I have passed no persons this time save two patrolmen. One of these stopped and stared after me as I tramped along in the drumming rain. The other came up as if to hail me, then let me go without a word after he'd got

within a few yards of me. Both acted oddly, but neither made any effort to arrest me. And wouldn't you think, if I were a wanted criminal, I would be taken to a cell at once?

It is very confusing. . . .

I AM in a restaurant now. Not an all-night one. The restaurant is dark and no one is in it but myself. I broke into it through the glass front door, risking arrest. I had to get in out of the maddeningly monotonous rain. I am so wet and cold and desperate.

Above all, I am cold. So cold!

I am writing on a table beside the front window now, on more of the purloined telegraph blanks, with a street lamp outside giving me a fair amount of light.

There is something of frenzy in my resolve to write till I force an unwilling clue to my identity out of my reluctant memory. I'm getting desperate now. I must unlock my mind—and do it soon. For a new factor has entered my maddening situation.

I'm getting sleepy. But it's not exactly sleepiness that recurrently locks my muscles and makes my eyes blank. It seems to be something deeper than mere drowsiness. It is almost as though I were drugged.

Whatever it is, I have an intuitive feeling that I won't be able to fight it off indefinitely. And I'm clutching to the hope that my scribbling will yet find a way out for me. Hence—I scribble, although every atom of me urges me to drop the worn pencil and give up the attempt.

Again, however, I note that I am futilely writing nothing but my present experiences. Not once has a word come through that lights up a bit of my past. Just one contains some slight meaning that stirs my mind sluggishly.

Rain.

Rain, rain, rain. . . .

Thrumming in the streets like skeleton fingers on a mighty muted drum. Transilluminated by the infrequent, distant lightning. Crawling greasily down the window-glass. Softening the earth. . . .

What is the rain trying to tell me?

Who are you, Justin Crowe, Justin Crowe? . . .

I am so sleepy. And so cold. . . .

I HAVE been walking again. Walking through the drumming, somber rain.

I am far from the restaurant. Where? I don't know. But nearer still to the outskirts of the city. I am sitting on the running-board of a muddy touring-car in a small garage and repair shop, with a raw electric globe lighting the place—and a small, glassed-in office at one side.

A man sits at a scarred desk in the office, leaning back in a swivel chair with his feet up. He is asleep, with his mouth open. Evidently I saw that he was asleep and took the opportunity to get a few more minutes of shelter from the rain.

I say "evidently", for I have no recollection of coming into this small, unkempt-looking all-night place. My mind has been playing tricks again, this time in the present. I am beginning to forget, now, the things I have just done!

I remember feeling drowsy—almost drugged—back in the restaurant. I have a dim recollection of getting up from the table with my scribbled telegraph blanks tightly clutched in my stick-like fingers.

Then a blank, with only a few threads woven through it.

A few threads. Hazy pictures half held by memory. I heard a scream once, seeming to come from far away although I was sure it was from the lips of some-

one near at hand. I recall thinking several times that surely I was going in a remembered direction because my feet were carrying me ever more swiftly and surely. . . .

Where? Well, I still can't guess.

I also remember noting that the rain showed no signs of slackening. Its steady tattoo still sounds, in fact, as though never in the rest of time would it stop.

The rain. Crawling down the windowpane. Softening the earth. Softening the earth. . . .

Now where did that thought spring from? Why does the perfectly obvious and ordinary fact that a drenching rain softens earth seem to have such meaning for me? And what *is* the meaning?

The man in the little office has stirred in his chair. His mouth is no longer open. I think he is coming out of his doze.

No matter. Surely he will not deny me shelter. Surely he will let me spend the few remaining hours of night in here —let me lie in a corner while I give in to the terrific drowsiness that sweeps over me in waves.

I believe my legs have carried me back toward the same road out of the city by which I entered it. There is a house across the street that looks rather familiar. It is a bungalow, with a slate roof. Very familiar. . . .

Wait, now! Wait! Can it be . . . is it *my* house, by any chance? Is that why it seems familiar? . . .

No, I remember now. I passed it over three hours ago when I found myself entering the city limits with the dirt of some open field on my clothes. That is the only reason it strikes a faint note in my memory.

I came in by this street. I seem to be going out again by this street.

The drowsiness. It is sweeping over me again. . . .

I am broad awake *now!*

THE man in the office just woke up. He blinked at me through the glass of the office, took his feet down from the desk and started to get up. I could read his thought and his intention.

He thought I was a customer who had just driven in, and was coming to see what I wanted.

Then a most amazing expression came into his face. Sleep left it with a terrifying rapidity. His eyes went wide as he stared at me, and I saw his mouth open.

He shouted something, turned and ran.

But there was no way to run, behind him. There was nothing but the office wall. He bumped into it, turned, ran dazedly toward the door which opens just before me, then shouted again. He looked around for all the world like an animal mad with fear, running back and forth in insane little steps.

Then he picked up the chair, smashed through the big glass street window of the office, and leaped out.

Good God!

Am I an infamous murderer of little children? Have I been a Jack the Ripper, terrorizing this city, known to all in it? Have I a fiend's face, or a horribly disfiguring scar?

I must see myself! Among the other blankness that makes up that part of my brain which is called memory, there is a blank in the remembrance of what I look like. I may be some sort of horrible freak, normally hiding from public view, now wandering unaccustomedly abroad.

There should be a mirror in one of the cars parked in here, or over a washstand at the rear of the garage. I'll hunt one, if I can overcome this damned drowsiness which is again attacking me. . . .

THE drowsiness, it appears, conquered me. Also the persistent affliction of my amnesia.

I am again in a far place, with no knowledge of how I got here. Again I have walked in my sleep—if the profound, drugged drowsiness into which I dropped can be called by the trivial name of sleep.

And again my legs automatically bore me away from the heart of the city.

I am in the doorway of the very barber shop in which I saw the clock hours ago —my first conscious memory. It was five minutes past midnight then. It is twenty minutes of four in the morning now.

It is still raining, raining, *raining!*

As on all other window-panes, the rain drops roll bleakly down the window of this barber shop. As on all other window-panes.

As on the window-pane of that place . . . that other place. . . .

Where? And what happened to me there?

I hardly dare even think it to myself, but it seems to me that memory is stirring at last. A faint stirring, as yet telling me nothing, but beginning to whisper, to hint.

Perhaps my dogged persistence in writing whatever I think, whenever I get the chance, is beginning to bear fruit. I shall continue it as long as my cold fingers can hold this pencil stub, and as long as my sheaf of blanks holds out. . . .

I am sure, now, that my body knows where it is supposed to go, even if my brain does not. Yes, my feet know the way home. I am sure that if I trust to them, as a sleepy rider trusts his horse to find the way in the night, I shall be all right.

I have a compelling impulse to keep on walking out into the rain, into the blackness that comes before dawn—toward the open country.

That impulse fights with the increasingly frequent spells of drowsiness. Yet, *does* it fight with it? With my mind locked in blankness, I have come this far along a direction I instinctively feel is right. That would indicate that it does not matter whether I sleep or stay awake: I will still find my way home.

But I don't want to succumb to the drowsiness! Some dim alarm sounds in me when the drowsiness begins to descend. I feel that I *must not* give in to it! Why? I don't know. . . .

Once more I am writing only of present things. I don't want to do that. I want to write of the past. The past, and what happened to cause me to be wandering in the rain-beaten night, bareheaded, drenched, and numb with cold.

Rain, beating down. Trickling down a window-pane seen over white-enameled bars. . . .

There!

For an instant memory really cried out. But already the small voice is stilled. And the sleepiness descends. . . .

A quarter of four. Dawn will come soon, in spite of the black rain clouds blanketing the May sky. . . .

Again! Another stirring!

It is May! I know the month, at least! And my name—yes, it *must* be Justin Crowe!

Now three things have come to me. The month of the year, the conviction that my name is what I first thought it, and the tantalizing small remembrance of seeing, over white-enameled metal bars, a window-pane with rain trickling monotonously down it.

The imperious urge to walk on, farther from the city. . . . The overwhelming drowsiness. . . .

I can no longer resist. . . .

It is with wild excitement stirring under the thickening lethargy that chains me, that I write these words!

I am out of the city now. Far from the barber shop. The mud on my feet and legs shows that I have walked for some distance along an open road.

I am standing under a great tree, now, scrawling in the darkness, thinking on paper, with an occasional lightning flash to keep it from being entirely illegible. That is important. I must be able to read what I have written, in the morning, if my maddening amnesia still claims me.

But I am almost too stirred to write, for many faint glimmerings are coming back to me.

The rain-drenched window seen over the white-enameled bars! I am seeing more than that, now. I am seeing a man, near the bars, with a watch in his hand. A man—he is gray-haired, with a little goatee. . . .

I am stopped there, but it is the farthest I have yet gone. And in another direction I am progressing.

I know this great tree I'm standing under! I know this road!

The road goes to a summer colony called Gray's Lake. This big tree marks the half-way spot between Gray's Lake and the city. The lake is less than two miles ahead, down this straight road, past Rosehill Cemetery and an abandoned church. . . .

The name of the cemetery, the clear memory of the abandoned church—aren't these things sure proof that my memory is really returning?

I believe I know where I have been heading for. Gray's Lake. The summer colony there. I must have a cottage on the shore, toward which I have mechanically been traveling since leaving the telegraph office.

But I'm so drowsy! Can I get as far as the lake without dropping in my tracks? I must. Drenched and chilled as I am, the continued exposure might prove fatal.

Home! I'm on my way home now! I know it! I must reach there, and in the morning, with the aid of my scrawling and the familiar things around me, I'll be able to place myself and my station in life.

But this horrible sleepiness. . . .

The rain is slackening at last. And its slow stopping, like its previous thrumming beat, is trying to tell me something.

The rain—stopping. Something happened that other time, with its stopping. I must do something now, with its cessation. Something. . . . What?

Drowsy. . . . Rain stopping. . . .

I am sluggishly awake again. Awake—and once more in a black sea of despair and confusion. For my feet, and the compelling drive I thought to be so true, have betrayed me.

I am no longer on the road leading to the lake. I am in a graveyard. Rosehill Cemetery, of course. There is no other along here.

It is so dark that I can barely see the headstones, save when the distant lightning flares. And my eyes are so heavy with the mysterious sleepiness that I see the few remaining blanks I am still stubbornly scribbling on as only vague square blotches. God knows if I'll ever be able to read the scrawl.

And God knows if the reading will do any good, after all. I am afraid at the moment that it won't. For I have been betrayed by the subconscious senses I counted on to hasten me home.

Why am I in here, instead of hurrying, a dazed sleepwalker, to the lake?

The drowsiness! I suppose that is the answer. I hope it is. I hope my legs automatically turned me in here, instead of following their former path, because my body has at last rebelled and simply will have the exhausted slumber so long denied it. I would rather believe that than believe my feet do not know the road after all. For if I don't live at the lake, God knows where I live, and I am lost again. . . .

Only for a few minutes at a time can I stay awake now.

I have been asleep again, and have moved a little farther. But I have not moved out of the cemetery. I am still in that. I am farther from the gate, that is all.

The headstone at my elbow is very white and new-looking. Or perhaps it is white marble, and the drenching rain has washed it to give it that fresh look. . . .

No, it is new. The earth in front of it has no grass on it. It is a new grave.

I must stop this recording of the *present*. The *past!* That is the goal.

The past. Rain crawling down a window. Rain stopping. Something that happened when the rain stopped, as it is stopping now. Something I must do now, as it ceases.

A window seen over white-enameled bars. A gray-haired man with a goatee, looking at a watch. Voices. . . .

The past stirs. . . .

Voices!

"How long will it be, doctor?"

Some woman said that. Some woman dear to me!

The lips of the gray-haired man move. ". . . matter of minutes. . . ."

The voices fade. But no matter. The past is stirring at last. If only my terrific drowsiness will recede for a moment.

New earth before this new headstone. New earth softened by the diminishing rain. Earth scattered and disrupted as though upheaved by a force from underneath. Odd. . . .

But the voices break through again!

I *must* record this for the morrow:

"The rain is stopping. It will be over in a few minutes."

The man speaks, snapping shut his watch. "So will his life."

Now what does that mean? Rain stopping . . . something happening with the stopping of the rain . . . something I must do now as the rain stops. . . .

My legs are impelling me toward the broken earth of the new grave. They have betrayed me. My whole struggle has been a failure. I am not going home after all.

I am so drowsy . . . so cold. . . .

THE above message, scrawled in pencil on sodden telegraph blanks, was found on the morning of May tenth by the watchman at Rosehill Cemetery. It was found beside a new headstone with the epitaph: Justin B. Crowe, born March fourth 1895, died May seventh 1935.

"You can't kill the dead," she shrieked hysterically.

The Carnival of Death

By ARLTON EADIE

A thrilling mystery story of the present day—an eery adventure with a Golden Mummy, and strange death that walked at night

The Story Thus Far

WILMER DENTON, a young American archeologist acting for Lord Mounthead, finds a hidden Egyptian tomb containing rich treasures. The Egyptian Government permits Lord Mounthead to keep one of the mummies, which is that of a priest of Anubis, wearing the priest's high regalia of solid gold.

Denton had found the secret crypt by observing the actions of a mysterious Egyptian, named Kareef, whose groping

This story began in WEIRD TALES for September

fingers touched a secret spring that opened a trap-door from the tomb into the hidden mummy chamber. With fanatic zeal, Kareef warns Denton against despoiling the tomb. And after the Golden Mummy is taken to England, Kareef sends Lord Mounthead a message threatening him with death unless the mummy is returned to Egypt.

At dead of night, Lord Mounthead and Denton capture a marauder in the house, who proves to be a Russian named Boris Matrikoff. Matrikoff is obsessed with the belief that Denton's discovery of the Golden Mummy was made possible by a tip from him to Lord Mounthead, and that the mummy therefore is rightfully his.

Meanwhile Denton and Lord Mounthead's daughter Celia have fallen in love. Her stepmother, Lady Thelma (a former actress), tries to break up this affair, prompted by Lord Mounthead's secretary, Edwin Lorimer, an unscrupulous scoundrel who wants to marry Celia himself and thus gain possession of her fortune. Lorimer holds over Lady Thelma the threat to let Lord Mounthead know that she has never been divorced from her first husband, an actor named Claude Delorme, whom she had believed to be dead when she married Lord Mounthead. But Claude Delorme is alive.

To discredit Denton, Lady Thelma tells Lord Mounthead that Denton has been making love to her; and Lorimer hires an actor to imitate Denton's voice in a violent love scene with Lady Thelma. Completely fooled, Lord Mounthead orders the young American from the house. But Lorimer has made a bad mistake in his choice of actor, for unwittingly he has picked Claude Delorme, Lady Thelma's first husband!

Kareef has followed Lord Mounthead to England, and he promises Denton to clear him of his troubles if he will steal the Golden Mummy for Kareef. Denton refuses. Meanwhile still another claimant of the Golden Mummy appears, in the person of Professor Artemus Figg, who believes he has found the means to restore the mummy to life when it is embalmed with its insides intact, as the Golden Mummy has been.

Lady Thelma's husband confronts her and demands £5,000 as the price of his silence.

The story continues:

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12. Thelma Plans to Pay

THE ensuing three days were anxious ones for Lady Thelma. Although she was desperately eager to put into operation the plan suggested to her by the scheming secretary, the absence of Lord Mounthead made it impossible for her to do so. To her intense disappointment, he had been called away that same night to Manchester, where negotiations in connection with a proposed newspaper merger required his personal attention.

Little did the less fortunate people who watched her with envious eyes as she lolled negligently on the cushions of her magnificent limousine — exquisitely gowned, radiantly beautiful, and seemingly without a care in the world—little did they suspect the grisly specter which lurked unseen at her side. Every minute —every hour—brought nearer the time when the silence of Claude Delorme, her legal husband, must be bought or enforced; and as the precious moments slipped by without her being able to make even the first move in Lorimer's risky game, her fears almost reached the pitch of desperation. If Lord Mounthead did not return in time for her to get possession of a considerable sum of ready money before Delorme made his appearance, nothing short of absolute ruin lay before her.

"What is keeping him so long in the Midlands?" She had asked the question a hundred times of Edwin Lorimer.

"Important business," had been his invariable reply. "He will be back in time for the costume ball."

The night of the costume ball was the night on which Claude Delorme would have to be paid. Would she have time to put her plan into execution before the blow fell?

It was Celia who at length set her doubts at rest. Little as she loved her stepdaughter, Thelma could almost have hugged the girl in her delight when she came into her bedroom on the morning of the same day on which the carnival was to be held.

"Surprize, Thelma," Celia gayly cried, waving a telegram over her head. "Daddy's coming home!"

"When?" asked the other quickly.

"Why, today, of course."

"What time, girl—what time?" Thelma demanded with an impatience which she did not endeavor to conceal.

"He will be home in time for lunch. Why, what's the matter?" Celia said, as her stepmother sank back on her pillow with a gasping sob of relief. "Aren't you feeling well?"

"A—a sudden faintness—don't mind me—I'll be better presently," she smiled as she gave the assurance, and for once her smile was genuine. "I suppose it was the sudden joy of hearing of your dear father's return."

CELIA'S air was very thoughtful as she made her way downstairs. In her wildest dreams she had never credited the butterfly-like Lady Thelma with such a depth of affection for her elderly husband. But she noticed, however, that her stepmother seemed to have quite recovered her customary dictatorial air long before Lord Mounthead actually arrived.

Luncheon over, the newspaper magnate immediately made his way to his study, where he was joined shortly afterward by Thelma.

He looked up from the pile of documents before him as she entered; his first casual glance deepened into a look of concern as he noted for the first time the pallor of her drawn features and her feverishly glittering eyes.

"You are not looking well, Thelma," he said gently, patting her hand as it lay on the arm of his chair.

"Well, I have been a little bit worried while you've been away. I've been thinking of all that money that you have in the safe behind the bookcase. You really should not let me into your secrets, you know." She pinched his shaven cheek with an air of playful remonstrance.

Lord Mounthead laughed easily.

"No fear of anyone stealing that! Why, the money is as safe there as in the Bank of England vaults."

"I know, I know," she hastened to say. "But last night I had a terrible dream——"

"Dream!" He uttered the word in a tone of good-natured ridicule. "What did you have for your supper—lobster mayonnaise?"

She pursed up her lips in a petulant *moue*.

"Now you're laughing at me!" she cried reproachfully. Then she came closer to him, and laid her hand on his shoulder. "But really, John, I had a most awful dream. I thought that someone had found out the combination of that lock and had stolen all dear Celia's money! It was a positive nightmare—I woke all trembling with fright. What if it should be real?"

He shook his head. "Nonsense," he said decisively.

"Well, it has made me quite nervous, anyway," she went on. "I feel I shall

never be at ease until you have opened the safe and I have felt the money with my own hands. Otherwise I shan't enjoy myself one little bit at the ball tonight."

"But the money is safe enough," he assured her with a smile.

"How do you know unless you look? I must satisfy myself that it is really there. I must see it—I must feel it with my own hands." She brushed her warm red lips on his cheek. "Surely you would not have me a nervous wreck, tonight of all nights, just for the sake of a moment's work in opening the safe?"

With a tolerant shrug he rose to his feet and unlocked the secret door. She stood like a statue—her white teeth gripping her under-lip, her dark eyes watching the tiny figures on the dials come and go under the practised touch of her husband's fingers. The door swung open.

"There!" laughed Mounthead, pointing to the piles of packages on the green-painted shelves. "Are you satisfied now, you silly little dear?"

She gave a low cry of pretended relief.

"So it was only a dream after all!" she breathed. "Oh, I am so pleased to think that dear girl's fortune is quite safe!"

She drew near to the great open door, and, reaching her slender white arm within, ran her fingers over the top layer of the precious wads; taking them up and fingering the seals as though to satisfy herself that they were really intact.

"Yes, it was only a stupid dream after all," she murmured as she began to replace the wads one by one. "But I was so frightened, John dear—so frightened—ah! . . ."

She placed her hand to her head and staggered slightly. In an instant he caught her swaying figure in his arms. But she waved him away as she supported herself by holding the door of the safe.

"It is nothing," she told him quickly. "A glass of water——"

"Here's something that will meet the case better than water." He turned his back as he spoke and took a decanter and siphon from a cupboard in the lower part of his desk. Splashing a generous dose of the spirit into a tumbler, he filled it up with soda-water.

But before he could turn again, she had raised the hand in which she had retained a single packet of notes and had thrust the money into the bosom of her loosely fitting wrapper.

"Drink this," said Mounthead, offering the glass.

She took the merest sip and then put it aside.

"I feel better now—a mere passing dizziness—anxiety, I suppose," she told him with a smile. "But I'm all right now—quite all right. Now let me see you lock up your funny old safe, with all its money and things. Then I never wish to see the horrid thing again."

He obeyed with the air of one who humors a wayward child. Then, passing his hands fondly over her dark curls, he led her to the door.

"A strange girl, Thelma," he muttered to himself as he returned to his desk after she had gone. "Innocent as a child—but a darling child all the same."

He might have found reason to revise his opinion had he seen the expression on the face of the "innocent child" as she made her way to the upper floor. The smile on Thelma's face was a curious blending of triumph and contempt—triumph at her own cleverness—contempt for the old fool she had outwitted. She felt not the slightest compunction or remorse either for the girl whom she had robbed or for the man whose blind trust she had abused. All she thought of was the security that the stolen money would bring. For her past experience of Claude Delorme's uncontrollable temper told her that he would

not spare her if she failed to satisfy his demands. She would hand him the notes tonight, and would be rid of him for ever.

REACHING her own room, she carefully locked the door, then crossed to her writing-table and drew out the packet and read the superscription on the envelope:

The Honorable Celia Mounthead, it ran, and in the corner, enclosed in brackets, was the amount that the packet contained: [£5,000].

"Just the right sum that I require," she laughed to herself as she broke the seals and extracted the crisp squares of engraved paper. Seating herself, she drew a sheet of scented notepaper toward her and quickly wrote a few words:

The enclosed is more than full value for your "play." Take it, and never trouble me again.

Without troubling to sign the abrupt missive, she placed it with the wad of notes and thrust them together into a large envelope, which she addressed to Delorme by name. Then she struck a match, lit the taper which stood in a silver candlestick on her desk, and took up a stick of delicately tinted sealing-wax and held it in the flame.

At that moment there came a knock at the door.

With an exclamation of impatience, Thelma laid the sealing-wax aside and crossed to the door.

"Why do you interrupt me now, Annette?" she cried fretfully, as she saw her maid. "Don't you know that I'm not to be disturbed unless I ring?"

The maid spread her hands with an apologetic gesture which alone would have betrayed her nationality.

"Mais certainement, madame," she answered. "But you asked me to inform you the moment your carnival dress arrived."

Thelma gave a little cry of delight.

"It has come at last?" she cried eagerly.

"In *madame's* boudoir."

"I must try it on at once. Come with me, Annette."

Lady Thelma

A minute after mistress and maid had disappeared in the direction of the boudoir, Celia Mounthead entered the room. Seeing it empty, she was about to go, when her eyes chanced to fall upon the envelope from which the notes had been abstracted. To her amazement she saw it was addressed to herself, and that the seals were broken.

"Strange!" she murmured. Her wonder deepened as she caught sight of the amount written in the corner. "Who on earth has been presenting me with £5,000?"

The wonder in her eyes changed to suspicion as she noticed the second envelope, the lighted taper, and the stick of half-melted wax.

"Claude Delorme," she read slowly. "I was not aware that Thelma had a brother."

She rapidly counted the crisp banknotes. £5,000—the very sum written on the envelope addressed to herself! A hard look came into Celia's fine eyes as the horrible significance of her discovery rushed upon her. The beautiful girl whom her father had married was a thief!

For a minute she stood undecided how to act, her mind busy with the many aspects of this new problem. Worthless though she might be, her father loved his young wife with a love that was as deep as it was sincere; to accuse her of the theft would be to break his heart. At the same time Celia had no intention of al-

lowing the unknown Claude Delorme to take money which, she was sure, rightfully belonged to her. But she must act, and act quickly, for Thelma might return at any moment.

Urged by a sudden, unthinking impulse, she tore out two advertisement pages from a periodical lying near by and quickly substituted them for the notes in the envelope intended—as she assumed—for Thelma's brother. The money she placed in her own pocket and quickly quitted the room.

Only just in time, however. In the corridor she encountered Thelma, dressed in a gorgeous robe reminiscent of ancient Egypt.

"What do you think of my dress for tonight, Celia?" cried Thelma, with a laugh.

It required a strong effort of will for the other girl to steady her voice as she asked:

"Whom is it supposed to represent?"

"Cleopatra," was the gay reply.

For a moment Celia looked at the glittering figure before her, and as she looked an expression of cold contempt came into her eyes.

"A fitting character—for you!" she said, and walked along the corridor to her own room, to wrestle with the new problem which confronted her.

Lady Thelma watched her disappearing figure with narrowed eyes, biting her red lips in puzzled thought. Did this seemingly unsophisticated girl suspect her secret?

She dismissed the idea with a laughing shrug, then turned and entered her room. The envelopes still lay on the table where she had left them, and, little dreaming of their having been interfered with, she quickly sealed the one for Delorme and locked it away in a drawer.

There was a radiant smile on her lips as she replaced the keys.

"This night will see the end," she murmured to her reflection in the long glass. "In a few hours my troubles and difficulties will be past."

She breathed the words in light-hearted triumph. Little did she dream of the manner in which they were to be fulfilled.

13. The Costume Ball

It was a large and merry party of revelers who began to foregather in the huge ballroom of Mounthead Chase at nine o'clock that night. To say that the head of a huge newspaper group is "a power in the land" is but to repeat a superfluous truism; yet few people realize how great and how widespread that power is. Many people had likened Lord Mounthead to a colossus "bestriding this narrow world," but the simile, though apt enough, was scarcely complete. He was a colossus with three feet; one foot in the financial world, one in the political arena, and the third no less firmly planted in society—and not on the fringe of it, either. The list of guests that night read something like a miniature *Who's Who*, and many of the names they bore were only a shade less famous than those of the historical personages of bygone ages, whose habiliments and identities they had assumed for the time being.

Each guest had been requested to appear in the guise of the character in history whom he or she most admired, and the result in some instances was rather quaint; in others, the assumed character seemed to fit like the proverbial glove.

For instance, the personality of a famous Chancellor of the Exchequer was scarcely disguised at all by the cocked hat, gray overcoat and top-boots of Napoleon; while as Robespierre, a well-known Labor leader looked quite as sinister, and may have been as incorruptible, as the original. A celebrated

playwright and novelist affected the character of William Shakespeare, whom he strongly resembled—in features; another man of letters, noted for his brilliant epigrams, had insinuated his by no means lissom figure into pink fleshings in order to appear as a very jovial Bacchus. It was less obvious why Christopher Columbus should have been the choice of a prominent theatrical producer, although mature reflection might bring the suspicion that the connection between the English stage and the man who discovered America was not so remote, after all. A new-fledged R.A. of Futuristic leanings very modestly had attired himself as Rembrandt; while much amusement was caused when an ex-Premier appeared as a Welsh bard, bearing a lyre which gave the punsters of the opposite party plenty of scope for their wit.

Appropriately enough, Lord Mounthead had chosen to represent William Caxton, the first English printer. The rich costume of Egypt's Queen of Many Lovers displayed Lady Thelma's dark, imperious charms in full measure—too much so, in fact, to meet with her husband's entire approval. He surveyed the filmy draperies dubiously when she appeared before him previous to entering the ballroom.

"Very pretty, Thelma, very pretty indeed. But—ah—I hope you won't think me old-fashioned, but was it really necessary to keep so closely to historical accuracy in your—ah—costume?"

She patted him playfully with her ostrich-feather fan.

"Don't be silly, John. The costume is quite all right. Do you want me to go in full armor as Joan of Arc, and feel like a tinned sardine all the evening? This costume is an exact copy of Alexandre Cabanel's famous picture of Cleopatra poisoning her slaves."

"Maybe, my dear, maybe." It was clear that Lord Mounthead was far from convinced. "But you must understand that the climate and—ah—public opinion were very different in ancient Egypt. Do you not think that your dress might be—ah—eked out, as it were, by the addition of—ah—a jumper or something?"

"Jumpers weren't invented in those days, you silly man! I tell you there's nothing wrong with the costume—besides, I shall wear the golden breastplate and the rest of the jewels."

"What jewels?" he asked quickly.

"The ornaments of the Golden Mummy, of course. They will give the finishing touch."

Lord Mounthead shook his head slowly, his gray brows knitted in a frown.

"I don't like the idea, Thelma," he said in a tone unusually gruff.

Her dark eyes widened as she turned them on him.

"What idea?"

"The idea of your dancing decked in the trappings of the sacred mummy. I'm far from superstitious, but I don't like it, nevertheless, and I hope you will find some other ornaments for tonight."

Lady Thelma pouted like a spoilt child.

"But you don't understand, John. I had counted on wearing those jewels, and I told the costumers that they need not trouble to send paste ones to go with the costume. I shall look simply absurd if you will not let me wear the ornaments of the mummy. Who ever heard of Cleopatra without her diadem bearing the sacred asp?—and without a single jewel?" She stamped her tiny sandaled foot on the floor. "Surely you're not going to spoil my enjoyment for the sake of a mere whim? Haven't I more right to them than that wretched, dead-and-gone mummy?"

He shook his head slightly as he put out his hand toward the 'phone.

"I'll ask the costumers to send ornaments suitable for the character at once, Thelma," he told her gently. "They should arrive in less than an hour."

She snatched the receiver from him in a sudden blaze of fury.

"I'm not going to appear before my guests wearing a lot of cheap paste jewels!" she cried. "If I cannot wear the real ones I shall not enter the ballroom tonight!"

"But, Thelma——"

Her eyes were flaming as she evaded his outstretched arms.

"Don't talk to me—don't touch me! You don't love me—no, not one little bit! I believe you think more of your moldy old mummy than you do of me!"

She threw herself into a chair and burst into a flood of tears. Lord Mounthead gave a resigned shrug as he took out his bunch of keys and walked toward the door of his private museum.

"Very well, Thelma. As you insist on wearing them, so let it be."

"Oh, you darling!" she jumped to her feet, her eyes suspiciously dry in an instant, and threw her slender white arms round the old man's neck as she kissed him rapturously. Then, slipping her arm in his, she passed through the door to the room where the Golden Mummy lay.

In sharp contrast with the hum and bustle of the rest of the house, the museum was very still and silent. Their footsteps echoed hollowly as they made their way across the polished floor. In the dim light the painted figures of the ancient gods upon the walls seemed to look down threateningly on the mortals who dared to thrust themselves into their august presence. The pair of sphinxes which crouched, as though on guard, on either side of the huge sarcophagus seemed to defy them with their stony stare.

But Thelma had no thought for anything save the jewels; no eyes for anything save the pool of leaping, many-hued fires which flashed back, from a thousand glittering facets, the single electric globe suspended above the mummy.

"How beautiful!" She clasped her hands in ecstasy at the sight. "And you were going to deny them to me! Come, give them quickly, and let me put them on. Our guests will be waiting."

The man made a motion to obey; then paused and looked at her fixedly.

"You still wish it, Thelma?" he asked slowly.

"Of course," she cried impatiently. "Hurry!"

Something very like a sigh escaped his lips.

"Then you do so at your own risk."

Thelma uttered a long, contemptuous laugh.

"Risk?" she mocked. "What risk is there? Really, John, you make me tired with your silly superstitions!"

Without another word Mounthead stepped up to the granite sarcophagus, lifted the jeweled diadem from the head of the mummy and placed it on the head of his wife. At the same moment that it touched her raven curls a deep-throated, booming growl sounded in the distance.

"What's that?" cried Mounthead, starting.

"Only a storm coming up," laughed the girl lightly. "Nothing very wonderful in that, at this time of the year. The weather reports said we should have local thunder. Really, John," she looked at him with smiling contempt, "your nerves seem all——"

He silenced her with a quick, fierce gesture. His face was pale and drawn; his eyes held a look of anticipatory dread.

"There is another sound besides the thunder. Listen!"

In the deep silence which followed, a long-drawn howling floated to their straining ears.

"Jackals!" breathed the man in a hoarse whisper.

"More likely some wretched dog that has strayed into the grounds," she flung back impatiently. "For heaven's sake hurry up and give me the rest of the jewels. If I stay here much longer I shall get as jumpy as you are."

"Take them yourself," he muttered sullenly. "I will have nothing more to do with the rifling of that corpse."

For a moment she looked at him in surprize. Then, seeing that he was in earnest, she quickly unfastened the jeweled breast ornament and placed it on her own bosom. She did the same with the bracelets and anklets. Lastly she unbuckled the massive belt from the mummy, and, with the ruby-hilted dagger attached, deftly fastened it around her own slender waist.

And all the while the distant howling continued like the wail of a lost soul wind-driven through the night.

"There!" she cried triumphantly, standing up and twisting her sinuous body so that the jewels sparkled like living flames. "What was there to be afraid of? See, I have taken them myself."

"Then take this also!" said Lord Mounthead grimly.

She glanced down at the object which he had thrust into her hand. Her lips parted in a gasp of fear; her slender body shivered as though enveloped by a chilly draft.

"What is this for?" she demanded hoarsely.

"You may need it before long," was the quiet answer.

It was a small silver-plated revolver, loaded in every chamber.

14. *Denton Pays a Visit*

DURING his visit to a celebrated firm of theatrical costumers that afternoon, Wilmer Denton had been much exercised in his mind to decide on the historical character in which he should sink his own identity for the purpose of visiting the fancy dress ball that night. There had been a puzzled frown on his rather good-looking features as he had turned over the leaves of the large album of photographs which they brought out for his inspection.

It was necessary that the character he chose should admit of sufficient facial disguise to render him unrecognizable to Lord Mounthead and Lady Thelma when they came face to face with him, as they certainly would do in the course of the evening.

"I reckon this is the guy who never told a lie, isn't it?" he asked, pointing to a photograph of a man in a white wig and square-cut coat.

"Yes, sir. That's George Washington," the man had answered. "A very suitable character for an American, if I may venture an opinion."

Wilmer shook his head.

"Couldn't live up to the character," he confessed sadly. "Besides, I must go as a character who wears whiskers or something. As a matter of fact, I don't want people to know who I am."

The man turned the leaves rapidly.

"Why not Henry V? If you keep the vizor of the helmet closed——"

Wilmer Denton

"Guess I don't require a muzzle as yet." Wilmer looked with disfavor on the steel-clad figure. "Besides, I'd want a tin-opener every

time I wanted to get at my cigarette-case. No, I don't think I'll hire out that one-piece tin suit to go prancing around in. Show me something easier. Here—who's this guy?"

He pointed to a romantic-looking gentleman, the most prominent features of whose costume were a voluminous cloak, boots which reached to the thigh, a three-cornered hat and a black mask which covered most of his face.

"That is Claude Duval, the dashing highwayman," said the man.

"He's a sure-fire real historical character?"

"Oh, quite, sir—quite. He was hanged at Tyburn."

"That's good enough for me. I don't much fancy dancing in a pair of spurs like that—it kinda makes you unpopular with the ladies. But I guess that mask is just the eel's eyebrows. It's Claude Duval for mine."

The man very obligingly removed the offending articles from the top-boots, and Wilmer, realizing that he was cutting things rather fine with regard to time, decided to allow himself to be arrayed as the notorious Knight of the Road there and then.

"Will you wear the wig and make-up now?" asked the man as he slipped the sword-belt over Wilmer's shoulder and thrust a brace of long-barreled pistols into his sash.

"May as well have the full issue," said the amused American. "Anyone who catches sight of me on the way down will only think I've escaped from a circus."

When he looked in the glass ten minutes later he gave an exclamation of satisfaction. His own fresh complexion had been darkened to a swarthy tint; a mass of coal-black ringlets fell over his shoulders; a debonair upcurled mustache and imperial decorated his upper lip and chin; a pair of haughtily frowning, heavy eyebrows completely altered the expression of his eyes.

"Why, mammy wouldn't know her darling boy if she saw him now," he declared. "I reckon that mask won't be needed most of the time. I look a real, blown-in-the-glass, dyed-in-the-wool bad man from the back blocks. The butler'll sure put the silver into safe deposit when he sees me around!"

THANKS to the invitation-card which Celia had procured for him, he entered Mounthead Chase unquestioned. He felt his heart beating fast as he approached the dais where the hostess was receiving the guests.

"Whom have we here?" smiled Lady Thelma, as she looked at the masked figure with, he thought, some suspicion.

"Claude Duval, may it please your ladyship," he answered in a deep, assumed voice. As he raised his eyes to hers he saw, with a start that he was unable to suppress, that she was wearing the jewels of the Golden Mummy.

"A rare filcher of purses—and hearts!" she said lightly.

"Thou art right, gadzooks," he laughed as he bent and raised her extended hand to his lips with the gallantry which his assumed character seemed to demand. "By my halidom! Claude was some boy!"

He thought he saw her start as he uttered the word "Claude," and it seemed as if a new and more intense interest came into her eyes. But the next moment she had dismissed him with a smiling nod and was welcoming a truly gigantic "Bluff King Hal," who had followed him in.

He had not the slightest difficulty in recognizing Celia in the guise of the hap-

less Lady Jane Grey, but he thought it best to wait until some time had passed before accosting her with a playful "Stand and deliver!"

"So it's you?" she said, her somewhat troubled expression giving place to a smile of relief. "I should never have recognized you."

"All the better. I was just speculating whether your stepmammy did, though; she gave me a pretty cute look as I paid my respects to her." He looked at her anxiously. "But you're looking worried."

"I *am* worried," she whispered back, with a hasty glance round the crowded room. "But there are too many eyes on us here. I will see you in the conservatory—you know it?"

"I'm not likely to forget it!" Wilmer muttered grimly, as he moved away.

He was eagerly awaiting her at the appointed time, and presently he saw her figure flitting down the fern-shaded aisle.

"I made such a terrible discovery this afternoon," were her first words. "Lady Thelma is a crook!"

To her surprize the American took the news quite unmoved.

"I've suspected that for a long while —ever since she swore I'd kissed her when I hadn't," he said calmly. "But tell me what makes *you* think so."

Quickly she told him the bare outline of her discovery of the stolen notes in the envelope addressed to Claude Delorme. At the conclusion Wilmer stroked his false mustache thoughtfully.

"Looks to me like a reg'lar frame-up," was his comment. "Have you ever heard of this Claude Delorme before?"

She shook her head.

"Was there any address on the envelope?"

"No—just the name."

"Then it's evident that she didn't intend to mail it to him. In that case he may be among the guests tonight, and she's going to hand it to him on the quiet. I think I'll keep a watchful optic glued on the doings of Queen Cleopatra."

Celia Mounthead

"Of course you know that 'Delorme' was Thelma's name before she married," the girl explained. "This Claude may be her brother."

"Or someone even dearer than a brother," said Wilmer, with a baffling smile.

He was about to go when she called him back and handed him the wad of banknotes which she had taken from the envelope when she had substituted the sheets of newspaper.

"Will you take care of this for me?" she asked. "I feel nervous carrying such a large sum about with me."

"Sure," he agreed readily, as he placed the money in one of his capacious pockets. "I'll return it to you when we have our last dance together. So good-bye for the present, Celia. I'll probably have some news to tell you when I see you again. I've a hunch that some things are going to happen soon that'll knock the movies sick."

The next moment he was gone.

15. *The Mummy's Jewels*

FROM the first moment that her guests began to arrive Lady Thelma had eagerly scanned each face, trying to distinguish among them the well-known features of her actor-husband. But she soon gave up the task as hopeless; for, remembering Delorme's skill at "making up" his face, she realized it was scarcely likely that he would present himself in such a guise as to be recognizable. It was not until the ball had been in progress

for some time that a tall man wearing the flowing scarlet robes of the famous French churchman and diplomat, Cardinal Richelieu, approached her with a dignified request for the next dance. Almost in the same breath he asked in a whisper:

"Have you got the money, Thelma?"

She looked at him searchingly for a moment before replying. His height and build were about the same as Claude Delorme; but she looked in vain for the slightest resemblance in his face. The likeness to the scheming cardinal was indeed amazing. There were the same pallid, aquiline features; the same neat, gray mustache and short beard; from beneath his scarlet biretta there escaped a mass of silvery locks. Accustomed as Thelma was to the transformation which may be effected by the aid of false hair and grease-paint, she was amazed. Even after he had spoken she could hardly persuade herself that it was indeed her husband who stood before her.

"Who are you?" she asked dubiously.

The man gave a slow, crafty smile not unsuited to the character he represented.

"Scared of a trick, eh? Well, I don't blame you for being careful. Come with me and I'll soon convince you of my identity."

Only one pair of eyes noticed their departure as they slipped away from the merry throng. It was the very thing that Wilmer Denton had been waiting for, and he lost no time in following.

But he was not quick enough to see what took place. Once outside the ballroom, Thelma laid her hand on the arm of the man in the scarlet robe.

"No need to go farther," she whispered. "Our absence may be noticed. Here is the money," and she thrust the sealed packet into his hand.

"And here is the play," said the man, handing her a bulky envelope in return.

"You mean the farce!" Her eyes curled contemptuously as she made to hand it back. "Here, take it. Of course I know the idea of putting your information into dramatic form was a mere blind to protect yourself."

Delorme refused it with an impatient gesture.

"Exactly. And, it being such, you must accept it. I suppose the money is all right?" he said, fingering the bulky package she had given him.

"It's all you're likely to squeeze out of me!" she returned, eyeing him defiantly.

The man made no reply as he thrust the sealed envelope beneath his red robe and disappeared down the corridor, leaving the girl staring after him, her eyes clouded with uneasy speculation.

When Wilmer Denton saw her standing thus alone he knew that he was too late. He turned to retrace his steps, only to start back as he saw a tall, burly man in the costume of Henry VIII standing directly behind him. A startled exclamation burst from the bearded lips of the bluff monarch as Wilmer seized him and turned his face to the light.

"I thought so," commented the American in a grim whisper. "You are Boris Matrikoff!"

The Russian showed his teeth in a silent grin.

"And you, my friend, are Wilmer Denton. Come, come," he slipped his arm through that of the younger man and began to walk toward the crowded ballroom. "It seems that we are both uninvited guests. It will be to our mutual interest to respect each other's incognito."

Wilmer thought for a moment, then nodded in agreement.

"I guess you've said it, Henry. But I should like to know what your little game is, all the same."

Matrikoff laughed again.

"No need to seek far for the attraction that brought you here." And he jerked his head toward the spot where Celia was floating amid the dancers to the lilt of the latest dance tune.

Lord Mounthead, as he was accustomed to confess with a smile, was no dancer. He had quitted the crowded room at the earliest moment that was consistent with his duties of host, and now he was in deep consultation with a financier whose fame and activities were worldwide.

Israel Appenheim was a short, rotund man whose strongly marked Hebraic features no amount of art could disguise. It may have been for this reason that he had come in the character of Sennacherib, and very quaint he looked as he sat in one of the leather armchairs in the study, his plump figure encased in the brazen armor of the Assyrian monarch, puffing contentedly at one of his host's excellent cigars. The matter under discussion having been satisfactorily disposed of:

"By the way, Sir John," said Appenheim, rising to his feet. "Would it be possible for me to have a look at that wonderful Golden Mummy of yours? I've heard and read such a lot about it that I should like to see what it is really like."

"Certainly," Mounthead agreed readily, and produced his key and inserted it in the door which led to the museum. Before he could open it there came a knock on the study door. Leaving the key in the lock, he crossed to the other door and pulled back the catch, revealing the yellow visage and goatee beard of Professor Artemus Figg.

"Might I trouble you for a moment?" said the professor, rubbing his lean hands together.

Mounthead hesitated.

"I'm busy just at present," he demurred. "I was about to show Mr. Appenheim the Golden Mummy."

The professor coughed nervously and began to explain. He wished, he said, to have another look at the mummy, but he had hesitated to intrude at such a time. If, however, Lord Mounthead was about to unlock the museum, it would be a good opportunity for him to do so. If it would not be too much trouble——

"No trouble whatever," Mounthead assured him. "Come right in."

As the door was being unlocked Israel Appenheim glanced at the lock with an approving eye.

"I see you keep your treasures well guarded," he said carelessly. "I presume that you retain the only key?"

His host paused as though struck by a sudden recollection.

"By Jove! Now you remind me, that young American, Wilmer Denton, has never surrendered the key he used when his duties took him here. I must write and ask him for it tonight."

They passed through the two rooms and presently stood before the granite sarcophagus containing the celebrated mummy. Israel Appenheim made an exclamation of guttural disappointment as he surveyed the motionless figure.

"I thought the mummy was decorated with jewels," he said.

"Usually it is; but tonight my wife is wearing them in her character of Cleopatra."

There was a very curious expression in the Jew's beady eyes as he turned them on his host.

"The jewels that Lady Thelma is wearing are the ones belonging to this ancient mummy?" he asked in a puzzled voice.

"Yes. She borrowed them for the occasion," returned Mounthead; then, struck by the other's expression, he went

on. "You seem surprized, Mr. Appenheim?"

"I am surprized—very much so," admitted Appenheim. "I may say I am more than surprized to learn that the jewels Lady Thelma is wearing are the same as were discovered in that old Egyptian tomb."

Lord Mounthead was staring at his guest in undisguised amazement.

"Whatever do you mean?" he demanded. "Why should you be so surprized to hear that my wife is wearing the ancient jewels?"

Israel Appenheim laid his hand on Mounthead's arm with a friendly gesture.

"Pray do not be offended with me, Sir John, when I tell you that those jewels are nothing more than fakes."

"Fakes!" echoed the startled hearer. "Impossible—I took them from the ancient tomb with my own hands."

The Jew shrugged.

"Nevertheless they are paste, and when I say that, you can make up your mind that you're getting an expert opinion," said Appenheim decisively. "I particularly noticed Lady Thelma's jewelry, as well as that of the other guests. Not out of mere curiosity, but it sometimes pays in my line of business to know who owns real gems and who does not. Not that I thought your wife was in the habit of wearing false jewels," he added hastily. "Seeing that she was wearing a theatrical costume, I thought she had hired the decorations and ornaments from the same firm. But you may take my word for it that they are not genuine stones."

"What you say is inconceivable!" gasped Mounthead. "You are mistaken."

Appenheim thought for a moment; then looked up with a smile.

"It is quite possible to put the matter to a test which will settle the question beyond a possibility of error. I have heard that you have had an X-ray photograph taken of the mummy?"

Mounthead nodded, and the other went on.

"Have you it handy? I should like to examine it."

"It's in the next room. Come with me and I will show it to you."

The two men passed through the door, leaving Professor Figg alone with the mummy. No sooner had they quitted the room than he whipped from his pocket a small hypodermic syringe, already filled with a greenish solution. Bending over the mummy, he thrust the point through the thin golden covering and injected its contents into the body beneath. Then, concealing the instrument, he quickly joined the other two men, a smile of satisfaction on his saturnine features.

Both of his companions were too engrossed to notice his momentary absence. Appenheim was staring at the X-ray photo, a look of concentration on his fleshy face. Lord Mounthead was shifting nervously from foot to foot as he watched him.

At last the Jew looked up.

"It is as I thought," he announced. "The stones are false."

Mounthead threw out his hands with a gesture of disagreement.

"Absurd! The ancient Egyptians were not in the habit of using paste gems to decorate their dead."

Israel Appenheim lifted his fat shoulders in a shrug.

"If that is the case, the only explanation is that the gems are not ancient. This photograph," he tapped the card as he spoke, "admits of no other explanation."

"I fail to follow your train of reasoning," said Mounthead testily.

Artemus Figg

"It is simple enough," smiled Appenheim. "Under the X-rays a diamond is perfectly transparent, whereas an imitation stone is never so. This is due to the well-known fact that in order to give a high index of reflection and dispersive power to the imitation gem, the paste from which it is manufactured must contain a considerable amount of lead. The real gem, being pure carbon, allows the X-rays to pass through it unhindered; but the metal in the artificial gem obstructs the rays, and casts a shadow whose opacity varies with the amount of lead present. The X-ray is, in fact, a well-known method of testing precious stones, both to ascertain their genuineness and to reveal hidden flaws—I have used it thousands of times when I was in the business. If you will examine this radiograph you will see that every gem has come out perfectly black, instead of quite transparent, as would have been the case had they been genuine."

Lord Mounthead took the photograph and stared at it like a man in a dream.

"You're right," he said at last. "If the jewels are a modern fake, how about the mummy itself?"

Israel Appenheim took the photo again and examined it even closer.

"Well, there certainly seems to be a human body inside, for there are the bones. That part of it, at least, is genuine, for—hullo!" He uttered a sudden exclamation and bent closer, his beady eyes snapping with excitement. A moment later he jerked his head up with an abrupt question. "Who took this X-ray photograph of the mummy?"

"It was Doctor Cumbrey," Mounthead informed him.

"The doctor that was murdered at Deptford, some months ago?"

"Yes. One of his last acts must have been to post that photo to me, for I received it by the first post on the morning after his death. Here, where are you going?"

Israel Appenheim had laid down the photo and was making for the door. At Mounthead's question he glanced back.

"To 'phone to Scotland Yard," Appenheim jerked out over his shoulder. "That photograph holds the key to the Deptford crime—and to many other things besides."

Wondering and amazed, Professor Figg and Lord Mounthead followed the ex-diamond merchant from the room. So perturbed was the latter by the unexpected revelation that for the first time he neglected to lock the door of the room which contained the mummy of so much mystery.

16. *Celia Accuses Thelma*

WILMER DENTON, when he had recognized Boris Matrikoff beneath his disguise as Henry VIII, had at once jumped to the conclusion that the Russian was, like himself, an uninvited guest. If he had known the real character of the man he would have denounced him on the spot, even though his act would mean his own ignominious expulsion from Mounthead Chase and the abandoning of his plan to capture Kareef.

Lord Mounthead

He had closely scrutinized the face of every masqueradder in the hope of detecting the sinister Egyptian. But

the task seemed impossible of fulfilment; there were at least a score of men present who resembled Kareef in figure, any one of whom might have been he, and it was scarcely likely that he would make his appearance without an effective disguise. That the man was present he did not for a moment doubt. The trouble was to find him.

His mind was filled with these thoughts as he stood in a little alcove that was slightly raised above the level of the dancing-floor, his eyes searching among the mazy throng below. A light touch on his elbow caused him to glance round. It was Celia, her fine eyes clouded with troubled thought.

She made a little warning gesture, then beckoned him to follow, with a motion of her head.

"What is it?" he said in a low tone when they stood in the deserted lounge. "Have you seen the man we are seeking?"

She passed her hand across her forehead with a weary air, then shook her head.

"No," she answered, with a curious hesitation. "I have not seen him—yet I feel that he is very near."

"You feel it?" His tone seemed to convey a mildly amused surprize.

"Yes. I feel his presence—or the presence of something evil and menacing—in the very air around me. Oh!——" she broke off with a wan smile as she fluttered her hands in a gesture of helplessness. "I know that I can never make you understand what I feel—you will laugh at me when I say that a premonition of coming tragedy hangs like a weight on my heart. Something is going to happen—something terrible—I know it—I feel it. Oh! I am afraid . . . afraid!"

She ended with a sob and swayed as if about to fall in a heap at his feet. In an instant he had caught her in his arms and drawn her to him.

"Why, you are shaking like a leaf and your hands are deathly cold!" he cried with tender solicitude. "You are getting altogether too nervous over this wretched half-breed. One would almost think that you credited him with possessing supernatural powers."

"You remember that night—in the museum?" There was a tremor in her voice. "Then the Golden Mummy—spoke!"

The American threw back his head and burst into a hearty laugh.

"Yes—you dear little goose—he spoke *in English!* That fact in itself is enough to prove that it was Kareef, indulging in a little ventriloquism. It's hardly likely that a man who lived something like a couple of thousand years ago would understand a language that wasn't invented at that time!"

The dread slowly died in her eyes as she smiled a little shamefacedly.

"Of course. It never struck me in that light before."

He took her hands and gazed into her eyes.

"And now that I've laid that little spook that was troubling you, you'll be quite merry and bright?"

"Yes, yes," she smiled up at him. "But, Wilmer, I wish this night were over, all the same. You should not have come here. I feel you are in danger—danger of——"

A peal of mocking laughter, coming from the direction of the doorway, interrupted her. It was Lady Thelma, and her first words showed that she had been listening.

"Have no fear, my dearest Celia," she said harshly. "The only peril Wilmer Denton stands in is the danger of being thrown out of this house for the second

time!" She turned to the American and looked him up and down from between narrowed eyes. "So it was you after all? I thought your voice seemed strangely familiar when you were presented to me. It will be interesting to know where you obtained the invitation card with which you gained entry."

"I gave it to him," said Celia, stepping forward and throwing back her head defiantly. "He has come with the intention of clearing himself of the false accusation which you made against him."

Thelma lifted her white shoulders in a contemptuous shrug.

"Really?" she drawled. "A somewhat difficult task!"

"But one which I hope to tackle successfully," said Wilmer quietly. "Listen to me, Lady Thelma." He caught her by the wrist as she turned to go. "I don't profess to know how you and Edwin Lorimer managed to fool Lord Mounthead so as to make him believe that I was making love to you. I only know that the whole thing was a black conspiracy framed up to disgrace me in his eyes."

Thelma drew herself up, her whole body quivering with rage.

"You mean that I am a liar?" she burst out.

Wilmer Denton made her an elaborate bow.

"I mean that you are a very clever woman, Lady Thelma, and one not likely to let any overwhelming love for the truth stand in the way of your accomplishing what you set out to do."

A derisive smile twisted her painted lips.

"A most elaborate insult, Mr. Denton, and one which you shall have the pleasure of repeating before Lord Mounthead."

She turned and hurried toward the door. Before she could reach it:

"And you, Lady Thelma, will have the pleasure of explaining to Lord Mounthead what you have done with my £5,000," said Celia.

THELMA stopped dead in her stride and her body stiffened as though under the impact of a sudden blow. She swung round with a stammering question.

"What—what do you mean?"

"Where did you get the money that you sent to Claude Delorme?" Celia demanded unflinchingly.

The face of Lady Thelma went gray beneath its coating of powder and paint. She stood rigid, her dark eyes flashing with baffled fury, her hand clenching the ivory handle of her fan until her rings bit into the skin.

Twice she essayed to speak, but her shaking lips failed her. Then she turned on her heel and passed unsteadily from the room.

"I'll say you gave her a smack on her vanity that time," said Wilmer, gazing after her retreating figure. "But what is all this about the missing money?"

"It is in the packet I gave you," said Celia.

Wilmer Denton gave a long whistle of surprize.

"But where could she have stolen it from?" he asked.

Celia silenced him with a warning gesture. "Somebody is listening," she whispered.

It was a strangely attired figure that stood leaning against one of the pillars which flanked the doorway. Round his neck he wore a huge Elizabethan ruff; purple trunk-hose hung in folds and wrinkles on his thin legs; his body was encased in a gayly slashed doublet, while

a plumed hat was set at a rakish angle over one eye.

Celia Mounthead stared for a moment, then burst into a laugh.

"Why, it's Professor Figg!" she cried.

The man relinquished his hold on the pillar and came forward with unsteady dignity. It seemed very evident that he had visited the refreshment bar more than once in the course of the evening.

"Not so, young lady," he said, with a shake of his head which nearly unsettled his headgear. "For the nonce I have sunk my own identity in one of the Great Ones of the Past."

"Are you supposed to be Shakespeare?" Wilmer inquired, repressing a desire to laugh.

"Bacon," was the grave reply.

"Sorry—my mistake," said Wilmer politely.

Professor Figg acknowledged his apology with a wave of his hand.

"Your error was perhaps natural. Wiser men than you have confused the two before now. I have chosen to represent the character of Francis Bacon, Lord Verulam, Viscount St. Albans, because he was the father of inductive philosophy. In my humble opinion he was the founder of experimental science, and as such I honor him—the brightest star in the Elizabethan galaxy—*'Hesperus that led the starry host, rode brightest——'* "

At this juncture the professor tripped over the long rapier which dangled between his legs. Wilmer caught him as he fell and heaved him to his feet.

"Hold up, Lord Bacon," he grinned. "It strikes me that the father of experiment has been experimenting in the properties of liquids!"

"Experiment brings knowledge," said Figg, in a tone of rebuke.

"Yes—so long as you don't mix your experiments. Then they're apt to bring a fat head the next morning."

The disciple of Bacon appeared to disregard the ribald comment.

"I have made an experiment this night that will mark an epoch in medical science," he declared gravely. "Less than an hour ago I injected a drug which will bring the Golden Mummy to life."

"The Golden Mummy . . . to life?" gasped Celia.

The old professor nodded. "The drug will take some time to work," he went on, stalking to the door and facing about as he raised his hand with a solemn gesture. "But soon you will see the High Priest of Anubis walking the earth with life once more coursing through his veins!"

"He's crazy!" cried Wilmer, watching the scientist as he departed with unsteady steps in the direction of the buffet.

"I wonder if he is?" said Celia slowly.

17. The Golden Mummy Walks

THE mental shock experienced by Lady Thelma at her stepdaughter's abrupt and unexpected question, "Where did you get the money that you sent to Claude Delorme?" was so intense as to deaden her faculties for the time being. She had quitted the room like a woman in a dream, and it was more by instinct than by conscious action that she made her way upstairs to her boudoir. There, throwing herself on the settee in all her glittering finery, she clutched her throbbing head between her hands and tried to force herself to think.

The manner in which Celia had uttered the accusing question showed that it was no mere chance shot on the girl's part. She knew of the theft of the £5,000. How had she come by her knowledge? Had Lord Mounthead detected her well-planned sleight-of-hand when she had retained the wad of bank-

notes after replacing the rest of the money in the safe? She shook her head slightly as she dismissed that possibility. Why, then, did the girl suspect her?

She started to her feet as the explanation rushed upon her. Of course, just as she was about to seal the packet she had been called away by the arrival of her Cleopatra costume! She had left the room vacant, and on her return had encountered Celia in the corridor outside.

"The sly cat must have crept in then and examined my belongings!" she muttered fiercely, conveniently ignoring the fact that the "belongings" in question rightly belonged to the girl herself.

And now—what? Any moment Celia might inform her father of what she had seen; a search of the safe would follow, the loss of the money would be discovered, and maybe Delorme would be arrested with it still in his possession. Loving and indulgent as Lord Mounthead was, she knew him well enough to picture his rage when he knew the truth. His wife a bigamist and a thief! Justice she might expect from him—mercy never.

Tired out at last by her ceaseless pacing, she came to a halt opposite the dressing-table. A glint of polished metal showed among the litter of dainty trifles. It was the revolver which Lord Mounthead had handed her earlier in the evening.

She slowly put out her hand and picked it up, examining it with a detached air as she slowly clicked the cylinder round, noting that each chamber contained its cartridge. Like a voice heard in a dream she recalled his words when he had given it to her.

"You may need it before long," he had said.

She placed her finger on the safety-catch and pushed it forward until it obscured the word "safe" engraved on the silver plate. Then she slowly raised the weapon until the shining barrel was level with her temple.

Claude Delorme

In the breathless pause that followed, the faint strains of music floated to her ears from the ballroom below. Down there was music, light, laughter—life! Must she leave all behind? Should she give up without a struggle? No, by heaven, no! If the weapon be used at all, why not use it on Claude Delorme? Then she might regain possession of the money—replace it—explain it was a silly joke.

She lowered the revolver and thrust it into the bosom of her dress.

"Death may come and welcome when I am old and feeble," she cried aloud. "Tonight I want to live!"

"Do you?" said a voice like edged steel.

With a smothered scream she faced about—to meet the lowering gaze of Claude Delorme.

For a moment she stood mutely staring at the unexpected apparition, her eyes widely dilated, her breath coming in quick gasps.

"I thought you would be miles away by now," she said. "Why have you stayed here?"

"To see you," was the stern answer.

She continued to stare at him, and as she looked her first feeling of surprize gave place to another emotion. He was not acting now, and his voice and manner struck terror to Thelma's heart.

"But I have given you what you demanded," she cried. "Why do you wish to see me, then?"

"That I may thank you for what you gave me!" he said with menacing deliberation.

"But—but I gave you what you asked —£5,000—in banknotes," she faltered.

"You lying Jezebel!" he cried in a voice thick with fury. "You gave me *that!*"

She took up the packet that he tossed contemptuously at her feet, and opened it with shaking fingers. Inside were some folded sheets of newspaper.

"You thought to fool me with a dummy packet—but you will find that I'm not so easily got rid of!"

"I swear I never put those sheets of newspaper there!" she declared, staring at them as though unable to believe her eyes.

"Another lie!" He crossed to the table, snatched up a periodical and pointed to where some leaves had been hastily torn out. "Why, here is the very book they came out of. But enough of spilling fool talk."

He tossed the paper away and advanced toward her threateningly. "Hand over the cash, and be quick about it!"

She recoiled from him, wild-eyed.

"I swear by all I hold sacred——"

"And that's nothing!" he interrupted with a savage oath. "Come on—the money!"

"I haven't got it—I placed it in that envelope with my own hands and——" She stopped abruptly at a sudden recollection. "I see it all now!" she went on eagerly. "I was about to seal the envelope when I was called away to see my new dress. While I was out of the room Celia must have entered, taken the money and substituted that paper."

"Then ask her to give it back—she's not far away."

Thelma made a gesture of despair. "I—I can't," she stammered.

"Of course you can't—for the simple reason that she has not taken it," he sneered. "For the last time: Are you going to hand over the money you promised?"

"I have none. But—here——" She unbuckled the glittering belt from about her waist and held it toward him. "Take these jewels—take all I have——"

He took the belt and glanced at it. Then he gripped the handle of the Egyptian dagger and drew it from its sheath.

"This may be real," he said, feeling its razor-like edge. "As for the rest, well, it seems too good to be true."

He tossed the belt contemptuously aside, but he retained his grip on the hilt of the dagger. "I bargained for ready money—£5,000 was the price——"

"Be silent," she begged. "Someone will overhear."

"Let them!" he shouted recklessly. "What does it matter if they hear now or later? If I quit this room without the money it will be to go straight to Lord Mounthead, to tell him that his wife is no better than——"

With a lightning-like movement her hand flashed to her breast and drew out the revolver. Like a ray of blinding sunlight entering a dark cavern, the solution of her problem came to her. Who could condemn her for slaying a man who held a weapon in his hand?

She clenched her teeth as she raised the revolver level with his breast.

"You *will* be silent"—she hissed—"for ever!"

Her finger tightened on the trigger. Already the hammer was rising preparatory to crashing down and impinging on the detonator that would send the bullet

speeding on its deadly errand, when a faint noise in the corridor outside the door made her pause, rigid and unmoving, with terror hammering at her heart.

Delorme heard it, too, and his heart leapt with thankfulness. It meant to him a respite from the deadly peril into which he had thrust himself, for the girl would not dare to fire with a witness so near. Turning, he gained the door with a single bound, and as he tore it open a simultaneous cry burst from him and Thelma.

The corridor was lighted by electric wall-sconces placed at intervals along its length. By their light they saw a tall, sinister figure slowly advancing toward them from the direction of the study—a figure clad from head to foot in gold and wearing an expressionless, sphinx-like mask of the same gleaming metal.

"The Golden Mummy!" screamed Thelma in a voice of mortal fear.

"It's a trick—a practical joke," Delorme cried. "For God's sake keep your nerve."

When first they had caught sight of it the figure was half-way down the long gallery, but every second brought it nearer.

Great beads of sweat started from Delorme's forehead as he watched the steady approach of that grotesque caricature of the human form. Six paces nearer it came before he could throw off the lethargy which seemed to bind his limbs. Another pace nearer it came, and with an effort he roused himself to action.

"It's a trick!" he cried again as he turned to the girl. "I'll fix the joker. Give me that gun!"

He snatched the weapon from her nerveless grasp, took careful aim, and fired thrice straight into the golden face. Then he lowered the smoking revolver and stood waiting for the thing to fall headlong.

He knew it was impossible for him to have missed at that short range. The bullets had plowed through the mummy's forehead, leaving three neat holes to testify to the accuracy of his aim. Yet the Golden Mummy neither faltered nor paused in its steady advance. Not by so much as a single tremor or stagger did it indicate that it had received three wounds, any one of which would have brought instant death to a mortal man.

A burst of dreadful laughter came from Thelma's lips.

"You can't kill the dead!" she shrieked hysterically. "It is the High Priest of Anubis—alive again—alive and thirsting for vengeance!"

She stood like a woman turned to stone, her beautiful face twisted into a mask of frantic terror. Through a mist of death-like faintness she watched the approaching apparition. She would have fled, but her feet seemed rooted to the ground. She tried to scream, but only a hoarse rattle issued from her palsied lips.

Delorme raised his revolver again, but now it pointed at the fuse-box which controlled the electric lights of that part of the great house. He pressed the trigger and a spurt of flame licked from the muzzle, followed by a crashing report. Followed a brighter flash of violet fire from the shattered fuse-box, and the room and the gallery outside were plunged into darkness.

A few moments later a dreadful cry rang out. Fear and agony were in it as it rose and swelled out of the inky darkness like the wailing of a lost soul from the bottomless pit of torment. Abruptly it changed to a choking, liquid gurgle . . . then silence—a silence as deep and

unbroken as the black obscurity which shrouded that room of impenetrable night.

It was the death scream of Lady Thelma, cut short by the icy hand of the King of Shadows, the grim reaper who swings his remorseless scythe without distinction of rank or wealth, cutting short the mortal thread of rich and poor alike at the appointed hour.

The weird solution of the mystery will be revealed in the thrilling chapters that bring this story to a close in next month's WEIRD TALES. Order your copy now at your news dealer's.

When the Flame-Flowers Blossomed

By LESLIE F. STONE

A bizarre fantasy of strange life on the planet Venus, and the dangerous adventure of two men from our own planet

ONE moment the forest was serenely quiet, somnolent; the next it was in an uproar. For it was not every day that a space-ship dropped out of the swirling mists that topped the waving fern-crown of the tallest and most ancient of the great Ancadus tree-ferns, furrowing the rich dark loam of the clearing floor.

Not that the Ancadus guessed the long black cylinder to be a space-ship. Their conception of the universe was limited to that space beneath the gray cloud-masses that enfolded their world. Nor could they conceive of a vehicle of transportation. For their life began in an overlarge, hard-cased seed-spore that grew into a free-moving young tree-fern that made the best of its god-given activity until the urge to root itself came; then one stood ever upright, living and dreaming, conversing with one's neighbors, ever ready to flip forth a tentacle to ensnare one of the silly, unthinkable animals that foolishly accepted the lure of the fleshy, false fruits that the Ancadus dangled as bait for just that purpose.

Nevertheless, they were stirred, curious. From amid the stationary boles of their elders came the young ferns, bal-

"Intermingled with the unnamable creakings and cracklings were the cries of the dying race."

ancing themselves upon their five walking-roots, eager to see what they could see, just as young Earthlings would have pushed themselves forward between the bodies of their elders had such a strange phenomenon taken place on their Main Street.

Unmolested by the cutting ax of Man, with no other enemy than the encroaching life-choking parasitic vines that the Ancadus, by means of their long flexible tentacles, kept to the background, the great tree-ferns were truly the monarchs of all they surveyed. Since Mother Nature had failed to provide cross-pollination in the form of insects, and since their giant seed-spores were too heavy for the soft, gentle winds of Venus to bear aloft, they had developed perambulatory movement in the young so that all the

planet might know them, and that the young should not choke the old.

Early in their life history they had discovered a predilection for animal blood, and to satisfy this unnatural lust they had brought forth large flesh-flowers that the gurgura, the ruswan, the petrus and the bav could not resist. Wisely the great Ancadus tree-ferns did not kill outright, but took their toll of blood from each passing creature, leaving it to crawl away as best it could, knowing that as soon as it had replenished its life-fluid the silly little beast would come again and again to the bait.

Innocent-looking enough were these vampire trees with their pale, white trunks topped with snowy crowns of crackling fronds wherein nestled the furled tentacles, curled, like rosettes, just above the dead black band which was the eye-circle. But those selfsame tentacles, sometimes a hundred feet long, endowed with the twin senses of hearing and smelling, were as deadly as the cobra, and the eye-circle gave vision in every direction.

Now the Ancadus were filled with questions.

"What is it?"

"Is it animal or vegetable?"

"Whence did it come?"

"How did it get here?"

"Has anyone ever seen such life before?"

These were but a few of the questions coming from all sides, for during the long millenniums of their evolution the great Ancadus tree-ferns had evolved speech and thought. Not speech such as Man uses, nor voice tones like those of the lesser animals. No mechanism could have recorded the speech of the tree-ferns, since it possessed no sound as animal life knows sound. But it was there, within the consciousness of the trees themselves.

Suddenly there was an end to the questions. Old Gorn, the patriarch, standing on the edge of the clearing, was voicing his thoughts. And when he spoke, all else were silent.

"Children," said he, "a strange visitant has come among us. Never in all my long centuries have I seen the like. None of us knows what this thing may portend for us. But only it can answer our questions. Therefore, let us commune with it, wait for it to break the silence. Only the foolish ask questions of the infinite."

As if his words were the thing the black cylinder awaited, the cylinder spawned, there before their eyes, two six-feet high, free-moving creatures.

Never had the great Ancadus tree-ferns known such life. Tunnux and Nushu, two newly rooted tree-ferns, were too excited to heed the patriarch's warning. Softly they conversed between themselves.

"What can they be? Certainly they are quite unlike any trees I ever saw in all my roving days," whispered Tunnux.

"Adolescents, unquestionably," murmured Nushu, "since they have freedom of movement and walk upright. No animal moves so. Only trees are thus gifted!"

"But how sparse grow their fern-crowns! Poor things, there is small beauty in their family if they are truly representative of their species."

"Trees indeed! Look again, my friends," an older tree was speaking. "Did ever you see trees with bark that grows as theirs grows, *away* from the bole? And look you to the shortness of the upper tentacles. Ugh, they're clawed, clawed like the animals. And see—no eye-circle either, merely two ugly seeing-balls set in pinkish bark. Then they possess but one sucker and those queer smelling-appendages such as animals use to smell out our flowers! Trees indeed!

Soon they'll come seekig our fruits to feast upon. Look you and see how like they are to that cacmu that I bled two days since, and from which I am still feeling indisposed."

On all sides other discussions were carried on. Two camps were formed; those that likened the spawn of the cylinder to themselves, and those that likened them to the animals. That they walked upright as no animal walked upright, and wore a fern-crown, sparse though it was, made them comparable to the tree-ferns. But on the other hand, who had ever heard of trees with seeing-balls, single suckers, clawed tentacles and the like?

Too, if they were trees they had small intelligence (no one expected an animal to have intelligence), for they failed to grasp Gorn's simplest communication. And now they were acting as no other tree, or animal either, for that matter, had ever acted.

Very rarely there occur on the planet great wind storms, storms strong enough to sway the great Ancadus tree-ferns from side to side. Once, a decade back, there had been a storm that had actually bent the boles of the younger, slenderer trees half-way to the ground. Thus, the Ancadus had thought they knew something of bending. Yet here were the spawn of the black cylinder doing more than that. They were bending themselves in two!

And no wonder! Some of the young trees had to snicker. To pluck something from the ground the poor creatures had to bend themselves double for the simple reason that their grasping tentacles could not reach the ground. To think of it!

So engrossed were the trees over this ridiculous predicament of the visitors they had not bothered to notice what the creatures were picking up from the ground, were gathering together into a heap not far from the open mouth of the cylinder. When they did notice, it was something else to laugh over. The silly things, going to the trouble of collecting those things . . . twigs, sticks, desiccated remains of old fronds dropped by the Ancadus. Could one actually believe it? They must be related to the petrus that collects such trash upon which to lie down after tiring themselves by running here and there on their inadequate walking-roots.

But wait, what was this?

Before the very eye-circles of the trees they did it, bringing the old dead things to life once more. And such life!

Several young trees that had pushed close to the edge of the clearing all but lost their balance and toppled over in their surprize, and a great sigh went up from the whole watching forest. Who would have believed that such beautiful flowers dwelt in that old dead cellulose? Not even Gorn was able to name those dancing convolutions. For to the great Ancadus, fire was as unknown as were the men that had brought it into being.

What could the Ancadus know of fire in their mist-clothed world where even lightning was so rare a thing that Gorn, older than the oldest civilization of Man, had had no experience with it?

Ohing and ahing, the forest stared at the new beauty, enthralled. It was for Elsel, one of the youngest free-moving fern-trees, to consider investigating it.

Carefully—oh so carefully!—so as to draw no attention to himself, he lowered his longest tentacle, unfurling it inch by inch, his eye-circlet upon those gorgeous flowers that bloomed and died as rapidly as do the flowers of the xmaur bush. And so fully were his senses trained upon those dancing efflorescences that he was not aware of the latest findings of his people concerning the intruders.

From downwind, across the clearing, Naxum, an old tree, was reporting. He

had the scent. And to the adult trees the brilliance of the saltant flames was paled, all else was as nothing to this new intelligence. Blood and flesh. Blood! Blood!

By the forest right Gorn, the patriarch, should be first to taste the blood. As oldest of the clan it was his due when strange, new delicacies wandered thither. But the ancient tree-fern was wise. He had seen what had overtaken tree-ferns that had dined unwisely, for not all animal blood is beneficial to tree-life.

Not far from where he stood there leaned the remains of a tree-fern that had sipped the blood of a pocus, a creature tradition taught was poisonous. It had been at a time of famine, and Daxur, the rash tree, had not listened to Gorn's sage wisdom when that soft-fleshed beast came into the forest. In consequence, Daxur no longer answered when spoken to. Bark had scaled from his sides, leaving ugly raw wounds, and he could no longer stand upright, but leaned against his nearer neighbors that would gladly have allowed him to fall had they been capable of moving their own rooted boles.

Therefore, Gorn suggested caution. He asked that lots be drawn, that but one of their number taste the blood of the strangers. That one's reward, in turn, would be that of a hero—or a martyr, as the case might be.

"Wherefrom come this pair, therefrom will come others. Bide your time, and when the black cylinder spawns again all shall dine; else leave the creatures strictly alone, according to the findings!"

But for the first time in his patriarchy his people had not wanted to listen to Gorn. One only to be chosen to the repast? Was Gorn in his dotage? Nay, here was blood, and according to Naxum its odor was savory. The pocus, they all knew, was poisonous. Was that reason enough to condemn the new animals likewise? Nay, if Gorn refused his right, then the rest would adhere to the Law. The Law!

And the next instant the forest bloomed like a fairy glade as every Ancadus within a quarter of a mile of the clearing, excepting Gorn, blossomed with brilliantly tinted false fruits that they brought at will from an excrescence at the tip of the long grasping tentacles. Henceforth, everything depended upon the prey itself; they would choose that fruit most attractive, and to whomsoever selected went the spoils. That was the law of the forest.

Never in the history of the Ancadus had any red-blooded creature refused the lure, and certainly they had no expectation that the newcomers would ignore it. Such a thing was unheard of. Yet the men gave but a long, wondering glance at the floral display, turning back to the strange, shiny object they had in the meantime dragged from the cylinder, a queer affair of queerer angles.

How were the Ancadus to know this for a radio with which the men intended to contact their home planet, to advise it of their safe arrival? Space, time, radio —these were as nothing to the Ancadus. They knew only consternation at this untoward event. Such a happening was without precedent in their annals. It went against all tradition. An animal to disregard their lush, richly odorous fruit? Unthinkable! Unwilling to believe that the creatures would not rise to the bait sooner or later, they waited, tense.

However, not all the Ancadus were thus aroused. Little Elsel, the young free-moving tree-fern, was not at all concerned in the blood of the cylinder's spawn. Not until he had rooted himself would he bother himself about fleshy animals. It was the flowering flames of the campfire that intrigued him. By inching

his tentacle forward over the ground he had reached a point midway between the fire and himself without having been detected by either the fire-breeders or the tree-ferns.

The radio, which the pair were setting up, likewise meant nothing to him; its squareness was something outside his comprehension. Only in the infinitesimal does Nature produce cube shapes, and the object before him was as *outré* to him as a three-dimensional object would be to a two-dimensional creature. All the senses of the young tree-fern were concentrated upon the campfire with its ebullient blossoms rising and dying in one breath. So it happened that he did not notice that one of the pair had turned its seeing-balls in his direction.

Rising from the spot upon which he had folded himself, the creature shuffled across the clearing to where Elsel's tentacle tip lay.

FRIGHTENED, the perambulatory tree-fern froze into immobility; his tentacle lay like a dead end of a creeper vine. It gave him shivers to see the beast bend down to inspect it with near-sighted eyeballs, and he sighed a great sigh of relief when the creature went back to the fire.

Waiting until he was settled once more, Elsel again took up his march to the flames. It was purely accidental that he brushed the stumpy walking-root of the second creature bending over that squarish object by the fire. Nor was he prepared for the wild yell the thing emitted, causing the pair of them to dash away in wild confusion. That, however, was to be expected; for did not all animals respect and fear the great Ancadus?

Only Elsel had not expected them to return so quickly, to pick up his offending tentacle. It made him cringe, that touch of warm, resilient animal flesh. Not until he had taken root could he know excitement at such close proximity. But when the same creature thrust an exploring claw inside one of his rubbery sucking-cups that covered the underside of his tentacle, his reaction in closing over the claw was entirely involuntary. If the creature had not screamed in fear and shaken him loose, Elsel would have released him anyway. Still, he was wholly unprepared for the next moment, when the tentacular feeler fell into the fire.

To think that those lovely, dancing flowers could be so bitter, so cruel! The agony of Elsel's cry resounded throughout all the forest. The pain was of a proportion the like of which he had never dreamed. No wonder he writhed, beating the air, the ground, in his wild anguish. Again he screamed. Gradually, as the shock died away, he regained sufficient composure to withdraw his wounded appendage. Nursing his pain he turned away, halting now and then to unfurl the bedeviled member and plunge it deep into the cool, rich loam of the forest floor wherein there seemed to be a slight balm.

One would think that the Ancadus would have taken warning from that direful experience of the young tree-fern. They had all seen, and they had heard. Yet the smell of the blood that Elsel had drawn was too intoxicating.

Simultaneously a dozen or more long tentacles shot across the clearing to the cylinder into which the men had darted to escape the flaying whip. They avoided the fire, but beyond that the tree-ferns were insensible to any danger that might arise from their action.

Having learned something of the flexibility of those long, questing arms, the men did not quit the protective shadow of their space-ship immediately, and at sight of those feelers lashing out toward them they ran again within the confines of the cylinder. Before they could bar-

ricade themselves, half the tentacles had followed them in, feeling with sensitive tip-ends for the pair, forbidding the shutting of the ship's mouth by their bulk.

Instantly, three tentacles fastened themselves upon the fighting form of one of the men. Somehow the other managed to hide himself, and no matter how the remaining feelers searched they could not find him. Though they possessed scent, they were blind, depending upon the eye-circles set just below the fern-crown of the tree, and the animal smell of the two was thick inside the cylinder.

Even after the captive had been withdrawn inch by inch, battling every step of the way, those others failed to locate his companion, concealed in some crevice. They withdrew at last, only to remain outside, waiting. . . .

GEEB, Masur and Jadan argued among themselves over their victim, each claiming himself in rightful possession as they dragged the man across the clearing, lifted him screaming and struggling into the air. Then Masur fastened his suckers upon the pink bark of the creature's arm and imbibed deeply of the rich life-fluid. That was too much for the others. Forgetting their quarrel, they realized that part of the feast is better than none at all. Here was one creature who would not be allowed to crawl away half dead, to return again on the morrow. They would suck him dry and toss the husk away.

But it had not entered the thoughts of the Ancadus that the second man would actually come to the rescue of his brother creature. The Ancadus were individualists, banding together only when concerned with the common weal of their species. They could not conceive of unselfishness in another. Therefore, those that guarded the cylinder mouth had permitted their appendages to grow lax, and they were wholly unprepared to act instantly as the second man came hurtling into the open in answer to the pleas of his fellow.

Elsel had taught him how the Ancadus reacted to even a minor burn, and he had good reason to be glad that the campfire was ready at hand. Grasping a lighted brand, he flung it among the serpentine coils that held his friend aloft. And again the forest listened to the agony shriek of their kind in answer to the bite of the flame-blossoms. Unconsciously Masur and Jadan flinched, and in so doing loosed their hold upon their victim. Then as a second and third flaming brand came flying through the air they dropped the captive.

Weakened by loss of blood, and dazed by the twelve-foot fall, the man was slow in reorganizing his faculties, and before he succeeded in regaining his upright position, two more tentacles reached out and grasped him. In their gluttony the rest of the tree-ferns disregarded the menace of the flame-flowers.

Only no more brands came flying through the air as those tentacles in the clearing sought out the avenger. To each he was forced to give his baptism of fire before they were willing to leave him to his own devices.

But they served to reduce his ammunition, and to replenish it the man had to leave the fire, dash here and there to gather such sticks as lay close at hand. Twice a tentacle all but tripped him, but he danced safely away each time, and with the new supply of torches renewed the succor of his friend.

Reluctantly the constricting coils released the captive, who managed to climb to his walking-roots and stagger several steps before another blood-crazed tree-fern plucked him up.

Shaking a balled-up claw at the trees,

the fire-breeder went farther afield to collect more fuel, taking a lighted torch for his own protection.

Now, all this while old Gorn had thoughtfully been considering the scene. It had come to him that without a replenishment of his campfire the fire-breeder was powerless. Thereupon he transferred his surmise to his people, pointing out that if they but prevented the creature from gathering more faggots there could be no more fire-blossoms. Acting instantly upon the suggestion, a threatening circle was formed just out of reach of the fire itself.

But Gorn had not taken to account that inexplicable force driving the man to the aid of his companion. Finding his way barred on all sides he refused to acknowledge defeat. Turning upon himself he tore away part of what to the trees appeared to be his outer bark and threw it into the fire. Appalled, they saw him pluck it out flame-covered, and toss it into the air.

Taking the form of the fusim, the only flying thing of Venus, the coat slithered toward the captive man. Straightway Huj and Herul, his captors, dropped him just in time as the burn-thing enfolded him, falling flame-side out. That large chunk of burning life was too much for the horrified tree-ferns.

Had the great Ancadus tree-ferns but guessed the deadliness of those licking flame-tendrils they would have suffered the agonies of hell to stamp them out; but all they did was to gaze jealously, waiting for the fire-blossoms to fade away that they might again seize their prey. Those that had not been beset by the fire as yet were dubious, only half believing that the golden-red flowers were as hurtful as the screams of those who had felt their scorching breath made them out to be. Still, because they half believed, they stood back—waiting.

MEANWHILE their erstwhile victim was having his own troubles. Fire is at best a treacherous friend, and though he had tossed the burning cloak from him, curls of fire had already eased themselves into his hair, his clothing. Slapping them did not avail and he dropped to the ground to roll and twist in an effort to put them out, only to aggravate them in a bed of dry brush that lay in his path. True, as long as the fire wreathed him he was safe from the trees, but at the same time his condition was precarious, too weak as he was to fight the fire properly. Piteously he called to the other to save him.

But the fire-breeder was in bad straits himself. Threatened on every side by the enemy, unable to gather more fuel, he had already removed his boots, was coaxing them to burn, when suddenly he spied something he had not seen before, an old log lying in the shadow of the space-ship. Using one charred shoe, in which a flame teased, as a shield he forced several tentacles to give way until he could grasp the log end. Dragging it to the fire, he thrust one end into the fire. But the log refused to burn!

Gorn had forgotten that he had begged his people to let the visitors go unmolested. Now, in high glee he cried out: "He is defeated! And I, in my right, demand his blood. He is *mine!*" And as he spoke his tentacle shot across the clearing—only to dart away again in dismay. Even as he had spoken, the old log began to smoke; a feather of flame ran halfway up its length, died, only to be followed by a second tendril that bit deep into the butt.

Shouting his joy, the fire-breeder waited long enough for the fire to burn merrily; then like a flaming sword he used it to force the enemy to writhe away. One by one the menacing tentacles slithered to one side, opening up the path

that led to the side of the other man-creature who now lay as if dead, soot-blackened.

Beating out the flames that still wreathed him, the fire-breeder picked his comrade up and flung him over one shoulder. Then, pausing long enough to take a better grip upon the torch, he advanced, jabbing savagely at those tentacles not quick enough to give way.

Powerless to halt him, the Ancadus groaned in unison as he reached the cylinder and disappeared within with his burden, sealing the opening. But even as they lamented their loss and nursed their wounds, the cylinder gaped again, and the figure of the fire-breeder stood poised before him.

Exulting, the tree-ferns stared, then in one accord dozens of long arms shot out. This time they would have him! But no, the man was wary enough. Before the opening was resealed for the last time something came arching through the air to land at the roots of old Gorn. It was the flaming torch!

Again the Ancadus turned to their leader for advice. Should they try their strength upon the cylinder, crush it and pluck the creatures like bav from their hole? For the first time in their existence the old patriarch had no advice to give. He was more concerned with the hungry flames at his feet, one of which had already tested the texture of an old gnarled root that had broken through the forest loam.

The next instant the cylinder was taking to the air, filling the forest with an ugly roar. Then it was level with the fern-crowns. For a moment it seemed to hang suspended between land and sky. And to the horror of the Ancadus its rear end seemed to ignite—in a great blast of withering fire.

The fire-breeder had his revenge as the long tongue of flame bit deeply into the heart of the Ancadus grove. With his departure a new sound came into the forest, a deep throaty roar interspersed with strange unnamable creakings and cracklings wherein were intermingled the cries of the dying race, the loudest of which was the shriek of old Gorn.

Once inoculated with the virus of the fire, the whole world seemed ready to burn as immense flowers reared their angry, licking flames into the tallest perches of the forest, devouring everything in their path.

Elsel, the young free-moving tree-fern who had taken his hurt to the river, a good quarter of a mile from the clearing, there to lave his tentacle in the flood, saw the flame-flowers advance, apparently pushing the small band of perambulatory ferns that hurried ahead of them, toward the river.

All the world burns, the young ferns told Elsel; all are gone—Gorn, Naxum, Tunnux, Nushu, Geeb, Masur—all the great ones, all the middle-aged, all the newly rooted—all, all consumed by the ravenous flame-flowers that the intruders had loosed into their paradise. All were gone. All.

Standing on the river bank they waited, fearful, uncertain. They knew they could launch themselves upon the broad river, float upon its bosom into new lands; or they could cross the river to the salt barrens into which no self-respecting perambulatory tree-fern ever treads.

But their own hesitancy closed the first path as the florescent flames were seen to gather at the river's edge, a few hundred feet below, hissing as their fiery tongues tasted that liquid flood, painting the overhead clouds in their lurid light.

Out in space the fire-breeder saw that same pyrotechnical glow, saw in his mind's eye that calorific hell that he, a modern Prometheus, had engendered upon the bosom of Venus.

Top of the World

By TARLETON COLLIER

Would you like to be able to foresee the future? Then read this tale

IT HAPPENED in Miami, in Flagler Street. With the idea of asking somebody where he could find the transient bureau, Jones paused in front of one of those curio-souvenir shops with its glitter of gaudy wares fashioned from shells, its jewelry of coral, imitation jade, lapis lazuli; small bottles of orange blossom perfumery; horses, elephants, Scotties carved in bone; colored post-cards, ash-trays shaped like skulls, like dice, like cartoon characters; aquarium turtles with painted backs and all the other catch-penny plunder that is displayed for tourists. Next to the door sat a dark-haired girl, beside a cage in which sprawled striped reptiles and which bore a sign: "Baby Alligators, $1—We Ship Anywhere." Jones asked the girl.

Without a sound or any other stir she fluttered olive fingers in a gesture that directed him to the interior of the shop, then continued to stare heavy-lidded past him into the bright sunlight of the street. Jones paused a moment, his face sharpened with irritation. His feet ached. He would have shuffled along the sidewalk, but some movement amid the clutter of the shop attracted him and he went inside.

An old man stood awaiting him behind a counter which held a row of grotesque masks carved in the fibrous husks of coconuts. He might have been himself one of the effigies conjured into life, so brown and wizened he appeared, his eyes as bright as the glistening counterfeits in the carven faces.

"Is there anything you want?" he inquired in a voice of deep music.

"I couldn't buy a stamp," said Jones. "I want to know where is the transient bureau."

The amazing voice seemed to melt in a chuckle, to savor a pleasant dissent. "Ah! That is no wish at all. Your real desire lies in your reason for wanting to know. Why?"

"I want something to eat," said Jones. "I'm hungry. I want a bed. I'm tired."

The unction of that voice was broken by a kind of scornful laughter. "Is that all?"

"Ain't that enough?" asked Jones. "But since you ask me, I'd like to have two dollars to buy a ticket on Racketeer in the fifth race at Arlington Downs tomorrow."

The other's voice rose in a startling thunder. "What about your soul, man?"

"What about my belly?" asked Jones.

"You are a fool," said the curio merchant.

"If you wasn't so old," said Jones, "I'd smack you one."

"Ah!" The music dwindled in a sighing fall, as if by stratagem of softness to beguile an evil mood. "I may be your friend."

"I haven't got a friend," said Jones. "I don't want a friend."

The booming of the old man's voice may have been triumph, yet there was in it a vague bantering mockery. "Behold! The simple existence that should lead to contentment! Your wants are few,

you have no burdens because you love nobody."

"I love my kid," said Jones with an odd passion, "and don't you forget it. I'd die for him."

"Live for him," said the old man. He peered past Jones with a sort of blind look. "Go back to him. He needs you."

Jones laughed bitterly. "You're telling me? Well, tell me how I can go, old-timer. If the transient bureau——"

The little brown man leaned toward him with a quick eagerness. He raised a skinny finger. His voice was bated, and now a discord of excitement had entered to mar its melody. "I have something for you and your boy." He strained farther forward. His eyes were bright, and narrowed as by some shrewd intent. "Not our best, but sufficient for one with your simple requirements."

From the little finger of his left hand, the old man drew a ring of bronze. His hands were clammy, but there was strength of steel in their clutch upon Jones as he slipped the ring on the finger of the younger man. It was a strange thing, but the band which had come from his bony talon fitted snugly upon the stout hand of the other.

Jones looked at it with a sour eye, turning his hand. The ring was worn and grimy, with a sort of dim hieroglyph on its back. Not worth a cent.

"What's the gag?" asked Jones.

"It is yours now," said the old man with a deep sigh. He seemed to shrink, to lose life. "Its power is yours. Will it profit you to possess a sight of the future? You have it now—with that ring—one day ahead."

"Hooey," said Jones.

The old man smiled wearily. "Only one day. Tomorrow. But that is eternity. I have seen that I shall die tomorrow."

"Nuts," said Jones, and began pulling the ring from his finger.

The old man's gesture stopped him. "What do you want to know? It will be only what you ask to know. Not everything. Nor can you change anything."

Jones paused, seemed to droop expectantly. A blindish look came into his eyes. Then he gave a cry you could have heard from the street.

"God Almighty!" he said. "It's Rose Marie in the fifth race!"

He turned, lunging, toward the door; turned back so sharply that he staggered.

"Thanks, pal," he said, then was gone, trailed by the ghost of a chuckle.

JONES strode along Flagler Street to the hive of Second Avenue. He knew a place to make a bet, but when he reached it, he stopped short outside and cursed as his hands clapped his empty pockets. He stood brooding at the corner while the lights changed many times, red and green, then darted heedlessly into a red light and kept walking. It was pitch-dark when he paused in a quiet street, blinked away his daze in the incandescence of a shop window and sidled into a doorway at the tap of footsteps. A man approached, immaculate in light trousers and belted sport coat.

"I've got to have two dollars," said Jones, stepping in front of him.

The man made a gesture of impatience. "Get out of——"

Jones smashed his fist upon the words and the man went down. His head struck the metal base of the plate glass and he fell in the inert loose sprawl of a dummy. For Jones, it was the matter of less than four seconds to lift his bill-fold.

Downtown, the book-maker was mildly sardonic on the point of Rose Marie, but took Jones' two dollars and gave him a ticket. There was still seven dollars in

the bill-fold, and Jones found a late barber shop and asked for the works. Afterward he ate, paid for a dollar room in a hotel, and sent a telegram to a town in West Virginia:

"Tell Grandma to get you ready for trip. Be good. Daddy."

Rose Marie paid $109.60 at the track, but Jones collected only the bookie's fifteen-dollar limit. He left six dollars on a parlay in the next day's races, looked at the sport clothes in the windows along Flagler Street, bought a shirt and a three-dollar necktie.

When he collected the next day, he bought shoes and a pearl-gray hat; the day after, a suit of clothes.

The sky was blue and the crowds thickened day by day . . . Yale to beat Princeton . . . Fisherman's Luck at Tia Juana . . . Machine Gun at Pimlico . . . Alabama and fifteen points . . . The daily double . . . The right dog on the nose . . . U. S. Steel to buy . . . Nice over Ritchie . . .

THE boy came down early in December, and Jones, in splendor, met him and the grandmother at the station. Jones sobbed happily as the kid leaped into his arms.

"You little mutt! We're sitting pretty! On top of the world, pal!"

The six-year-old treble was ecstasy. "Daddy! I hardly knew you!"

"How do you like the old man's layout, you bozo? Look at the car! Wait till you see our shack!"

The ocean was green, with white lace as a fringe . . . October cotton for three-point rise . . . Sweetheart Mine at Epsom Downs . . . Guffey to beat Reed in Pennsylvania . . . Insull to be acquitted . . . Navy over Army . . . General Motors to sell . . . General Motors to buy . . . Londos five to one . . . Buy wheat . . . Notre Dame . . .

JONES swung the car southward from Coral Gables, swung across the canal into the twisting road to Tahiti Beach.

"You been here a month, bimbo. How'd you like to go to Monte Carlo?"

The kid squirmed cozily under his arm. "If you go too, daddy."

Jones laughed, deep-throated and content. On top of the world.

Sparkling, the bay came upon them around a bend.

"Tomorrow——" Jones began. He slowed the car. He leaned forward, seemed to peer, his thumb stroking the ring upon his little finger. Suddenly he screamed, jammed his foot upon the brake so sharply that the car quivered and the steering-wheel smashed into his chest.

"Daddy!"

"Bimbo! Kid!"

The mangroves moaned in the wind. The kid whimpered in fright and pain from Jones' savage clutch.

"Don't leave your old man, bimbo!"

"No, daddy. You hurt!"

The automobile careened, roaring, as Jones turned it around with a single wild sweep of the wheel. It rocked crazily as he drove it at eighty miles with one hand, the other holding the kid.

At the house in the oleanders he thrust the boy into the arms of the old woman, the grandmother.

"If you let him out of your sight—you let him in the street—I'll kill you!" he panted.

He dashed away in the car. Sunlight and shadows were blurs. Time was a blur. The gift shop in Flagler Street was gone, a fruit-juice booth was in its place. A woman there, edging nervously away from Jones, said she had heard the shop was closed when somebody died.

Jones wailed, then collapsed, sobbing.

"Died!" he babbled. "Died! I can't do nothing! I can't do nothing for my kid!"

Suddenly snarling, he tore the ring from his finger and flung it into the street. He shouted: "Damn you, devil!"

Lurching into his automobile, he fumbled for the handle of the door, to close it, and his hand struck the pocket in its side. His fingers jerked, stiffened, upon the harsh outlines of the object it contained.

"Bimbo!" he cried wildly.

The woman in the tropical fruit booth, who had been watching him, called out as he raised the pistol to his head, but above everything was the sound of the shot. In an instant people were running along the street to peer into the bright new car, that splendid car, at the limp huddle of the man who for a little while had been on top of the world, where no man may stay.

Mr. Berbeck Had a Dream

By AUGUST W. DERLETH

A strange little tale about an eery revenge

IF YOU had asked the neighbors about them, they would have agreed unanimously that the Berbecks were a bad lot, all three of them—the old lady, the son, and the daughter-in-law. Because of her one-time dubious association with the underworld, old Mrs. Berbeck was looked upon as a wicked old woman, her son a sniveling creature, and her daughter-in-law shrewish, to put it mildly. And one or two of those neighbors, more astute than the rest, wondered occasionally how it was that the old lady, for all her association with the criminal classes, could not spot the crook in her own family circle; meaning Peter Berbeck.

The facts of the matter were these: old Mrs. Berbeck, once indeed qualifying as a very wicked woman, was now nothing more than a somewhat querulous and largely harmless old lady suffering from a number of diseases any one of which might take her off at any time. Her son Peter was an office clerk and would probably never be anything else, a colorless man in his early forties, a definite type—wing collar, spectacles, strawy hair, small mustache and pouty mouth. His wife ran the house, though it belonged to the old lady. As a matter of fact, the two younger Berbecks were living on the old lady, even more than the elder Mrs. Berbeck suspected, and this was what the more astute of the neighbors hinted.

For Peter Berbeck, incapable as he looked, had some time before his mother's imminent death yielded to his wife's promptings that the old lady's bank balance be drawn upon. A simple matter of two bank-books, one for the old lady's eyes—a forgery, obviously; the other for use, forged orders, and in a few years the younger Berbecks had run through a comfortable inheritance with nothing to show for it. The old lady, of course, almost all this time assumed she had several thousands at her fingertips, and was happy until her death, which came about much sooner than she might have expected.

The plan went smoothly enough until the old lady began to look at her son and daughter-in-law with questions in her eyes. There were some uneasy moments when she sent her son to the bank for rather large sums of money. Fortunately, they had not been so unwise as to draw everything out. There were more uneasy moments when the old lady sent for a cab once or twice and came back late at night from mysterious trips with something she had bought—parts of some kind of machinery, which she lugged down into the cellar and stored there. And when, presently, an odd-looking machine began to take shape under her hands, the Peter Berbecks had no difficulty convincing themselves that the old lady was mad.

But the thing that finally upset the Peter Berbecks came about through the dirty, smudged letters that now occasionally came to the old lady. A burnt fragment of one of them one morning disclosed that old Mrs. Berbeck had paid what seemed to be a thousand dollars merely for the loan of some plates. This incensed her daughter-in-law, who thought that a stop ought to be put to such waste. Peter fluttered, mumbled something about duty, and shied clear.

Mrs. Peter Berbeck helped the old lady off this earthly plane by putting some arsenic in her coffee. A careless doctor obliged by pointing to two or three of the old lady's illnesses as causing her death. The period of mourning, naturally, was short. Even hypocrites find hypocrisy very irksome at times.

WHAT subsequently happened to Mr. and Mrs. Peter Berbeck is still largely a matter of conjecture—the facts behind the obvious evidence, that is. Several nights after the old lady's death, Peter Berbeck had a dream. He dreamed that his mother appeared to him, beckoned him from his bed to the cellar below, and showed him how to complete the setting up of the machine there. He dreamed, further, that he began to work the machine, and that, later, he found himself rummaging in the closet of his mother's room. He dreamed this dream successively, on several nights, and one night woke up on the cellar stairs, very tired, his clothes oil-stained, to find his wife standing beside him. It developed that she, too, had had an identical dream, and, indeed, her night-clothing was stained as was his.

And then came that final catastrophic dream—that there was an old shoe-box in his mother's closet filled to the brim with money that had never seen a bank. The following morning Peter told this dream in every detail to his wife, and she went directly to the closet and found the box with money in it, just as Peter had dreamed.

After that, there was a brief period of hilarious living, and then suddenly the bubble burst. Nothing seemed to go right, and when Mr. and Mrs. Peter Berbeck were finally haled into court and put up for trial their period of riotous living was definitely at an end. Peter told his story, and his wife told hers, but neither story seemed to be the right one, and Judge McIlrath of the Federal Court in Chicago frowned sternly before pronouncing sentence, and said, "It is almost inconceivable that seemingly educated persons could postulate such nonsense. The facts in this matter are plain. The evidence is without question, the crime deliberate. These preposterous stories are an affront to the dignity of this court, an insult to the intelligence of the jury."

Old Mrs. Berbeck would have enjoyed that, but she, poor lady, was quite dead,

unless we agree with those open-minded persons who believe that perhaps some of us never really die.

Trying blindly to seek a way out of the dilemma in which he found himself, Peter Berbeck claimed that things began to happen shortly after his mother's death.

"What things?" demanded the prosecution.

"Well, I had a dream," said Peter. "One night I dreamed that my mother appeared to me and took me by the hand and led me down into the cellar. The machine was there."

"You admit that, then, do you?"

"Yes," said Peter, not knowing why he should not. "My mother had friends among the—well, among criminals—and knew where she could get those things."

"I'm afraid that can not be admitted as evidence," said the prosecution. "Your mother is dead. We can hardly accept statements of this kind. The machine was there. Please go on with your dream, if you feel that it may help to explain the evidence against you."

"Well," resumed Peter. "I dreamed she led me down into the cellar and put my hands on the machine. I did as she told me. I put the machine together and seemed to work it. Then I was led back upstairs to bed. In the morning I saw that the machine had actually been put completely together."

"You would have this court believe the machine was not then together before that morning? Have you any outside evidence to support that contention?"

Peter shook his head. "I found oil on my pajamas once or twice," he added thoughtfully.

"You suggest to this court that this actually took place? That you did all this in your sleep?"

"Yes."

"And you say you had this dream more than once?"

"Yes, I did."

"But even if this court accepts such preposterous nonsense, can you think of any reason why your dead mother should be concerned in this matter?"

Peter Berbeck choked and said, "No." Obviously he could not say that his mother had very likely suspected and then found out about the pilfering of her bank balance, had then determined to wreak some sort of vengeance, had gone out and got the machine piecemeal into the house, and then trusted to luck (or did dreams come under some other head? And were they after all dreams?) to bring about their punishment. Was it not Shakespeare who once said that the whirligig of time brings about its own revenge?

MRS. PETER BERBECK had told much the same kind of story. Nor could she explain by saying that perhaps the old lady had guessed about the arsenic in her coffee and tried to get through from another world. She had presence of mind enough to realize that the relation of the dreams had had a strongly prejudicial effect without the further suggestion of something unnatural, supernatural. Like her husband, she was forced to keep silence and watch helplessly while this amazing web of evidence appeared against them.

Even the defense counsel thought that it would be best to leave old Mrs. Berbeck among the dead, where she properly belonged, despite a taxi-driver who turned up to volunteer that he remembered having driven the old lady back and forth on one occasion and distinctly recalled her carrying large bundles that might have been pieces of a machine. And the tale of the burnt fragment of

letter about plates was discounted at once. Dreams might have a place, but the Federal Court of Chicago was not that place.

When Peter Berbeck went on to tell about finding the box in his mother's closet also by the suggestion conveyed to him by his mother in a dream, the jury began to grow restless. Both defense and prosecution concentrated on the plates—where had the Berbecks hidden them? If they could be turned over to this court, it might not go so hard with the Berbecks. But both Peter and his wife denied any knowledge whatever of plates, and a thorough search of their house failed to reveal any sign of them. It was hardly to be expected that a certain smooth gentleman who had loaned the plates to old Mrs. Berbeck, and who had since retrieved them by the simple method of entering the Berbeck house by night through a cellar window and making off with them two nights before the Berbecks were placed under arrest, would come forward and tell his story. Certainly not. There is, after all, such a matter as preserving one's own skin even at the expense of others.

From the point-of-view of any outsider, the case was ludicrous indeed, and it was even more astounding that any court could be bothered to listen to even a curtailed version of the Berbecks' stories. But the Federal Court did—after all, it was a first offense—despite the clarity of the case against Peter Berbeck and his wife. The evidence was definite, imposing, and impregnable.

There was the payment on the car.

There was a payment to the grocer.

There was the payment to the milkman.

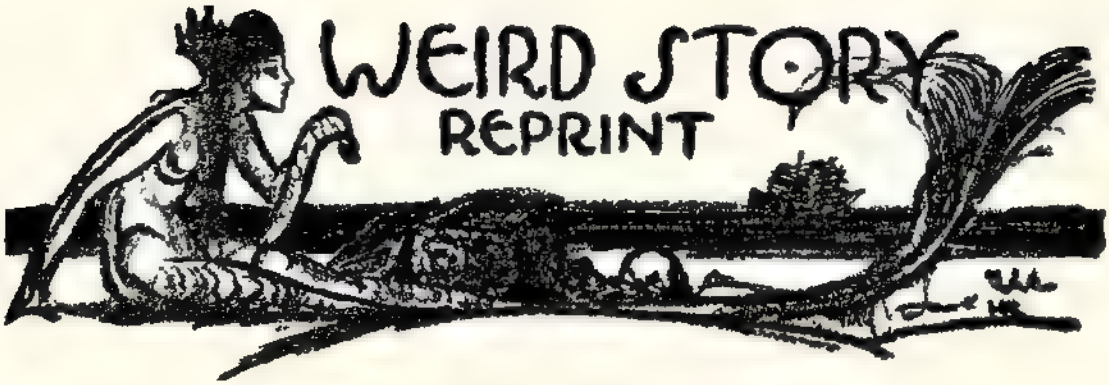
There were payments to the telephone and gas companies.

And finally that attempt to deposit the money at the bank.

There was nothing to be done. The court had never before listened to such preposterous explanations. These various payments now in evidence were conclusive. They had been made in counterfeit money, quite recently manufactured; there was a press for the printing of counterfeit money in the cellar, and the fingerprints of Mr. and Mrs. Peter Berbeck were all over it; and finally, there was the box of printed money still kept in what had been the old lady's closet. The failure of the accused to turn over the counterfeit plates could only make their penalty the more severe.

It was inconceivable that the court should be expected to give even momentary credence to the absurd contention of the accused that they had gone to the press in their sleep, that they had found the counterfeit money in the old lady's room after a dream, that they did not know it was counterfeit, that they did not now know and never had known where the plates were.

The court sentenced Peter Berbeck and his wife to ten years as guests of the Federal Government for counterfeiting and passing counterfeit currency of the nation. Judge McIlrath's gavel had absolutely no effect upon the convulsive chuckle that rang through the courtroom when sentence was pronounced. Nor could its source subsequently be traced; there were no old women in the courtroom, and the laughter was indisputably that of an old woman.



William Wilson

By EDGAR ALLAN POE

What say of it? what say of CONSCIENCE grim,
That specter in my path?
—Chamberlain's *Pharronida.*

LET me call myself, for the present, William Wilson. The fair page now lying before me need not be sullied with my real appellation. This has been already too much an object for the scorn—for the horror—for the detestation of my race. To the uttermost regions of the globe have not the indignant winds bruited its unparalleled infamy? Oh, outcast of all outcasts most abandoned!—to the earth art thou not for ever dead? to its horrors, to its flowers, to its golden aspirations?—and a cloud, dense, dismal, and limitless, does it not hang eternally between thy hopes and heaven?

I would not, if I could, here or today, embody a record of my later years of unspeakable misery and unpardonable crime. This epoch—these later years—took unto themselves a sudden elevation in turpitude, whose origin alone it is my present purpose to assign. Men usually grow base by degrees. From me, in an instant, all virtue dropped bodily as a mantle. From comparatively trivial wickedness I passed, with the stride of a giant, into more than the enormities of an Elah-Gabalus. What chance—what one event brought this evil thing to pass, bear with me while I relate. Death approaches; and the shadow which foreruns him has thrown a softening influence over my spirit. I long, in passing through the dim valley, for the sympathy—I had nearly said for the pity—of my fellow men. I would fain have them believe that I have been, in some measure, the slave of circumstances beyond human control. I would wish them to seek out for me, in the details I am about to give, some little oasis of *fatality* amid a wilderness of error. I would have them allow—what they cannot refrain from allowing—that, although temptation may have erewhile existed as great, man was never *thus,* at least, tempted before—certainly, never *thus* fell. And is it therefore that he has never thus suffered? Have I not indeed been living in a dream? And am I not now dying a victim to the horror and the mystery of the wildest of all sublunary visions?

I am the descendant of a race whose imaginative and easily excitable tempera-

ment has at all times rendered them remarkable; and, in my earliest infancy, I gave evidence of having fully inherited the family character. As I advanced in years it was more strongly developed; becoming, for many reasons, a cause of serious disquietude to my friends, and of positive injury to myself. I grew self-willed, addicted to the wildest caprices, and a prey to the most ungovernable passions. Weak-minded, and beset with constitutional infirmities akin to my own, my parents could do but little to check the evil propensities which distinguished me. Some feeble and ill-directed efforts resulted in complete failure on their part, and, of course, in total triumph on mine. Thenceforward my voice was a household law; and at an age when few children have abandoned their leading-strings, I was left to the guidance of my own will, and became, in all but name, the master of my own actions.

My earliest recollections of a school life are connected with a large, rambling, Elizabethan house, in a misty-looking village of England, where were a vast number of gigantic and gnarled trees, and where all the houses were excessively ancient. In truth, it was a dream-like and spirit-soothing place, that venerable old town. At this moment, in fancy, I feel the refreshing chilliness of its deeply-shadowed avenues, inhale the fragrance of its thousand shrubberies, and thrill anew with undefinable delight at the deep hollow note of the church-bell, breaking, each hour, with sullen and sudden roar, upon the stillness of the dusky atmosphere in which the fretted Gothic steeple lay imbedded and asleep.

It gives me, perhaps, as much of pleasure as I can now in any manner experience, to dwell upon minute recollections of the school and its concerns. Steeped in misery as I am—misery, alas! only too real—I shall be pardoned for seeking relief, however slight and temporary, in the weakness of a few rambling details. These, moreover, utterly trivial, and even ridiculous in themselves, assume, to my fancy, adventitious importance, as connected with a period and a locality when and where I recognize the first ambiguous monitions of the destiny which afterward so fully overshadowed me. Let me then remember.

The house, I have said, was old and irregular. The grounds were extensive, and a high and solid brick wall, topped with a bed of mortar and broken glass, encompassed the whole. This prison-like rampart formed the limit of our domain; beyond it we saw but thrice a week—once every Saturday afternoon, when, attended by two ushers, we were permitted to take brief walks in a body through some of the neighboring fields—and twice during Sunday, when we were paraded in the same formal manner to the morning and evening service in the one church of the village. Of this church the principal of our school was pastor. With how deep a spirit of wonder and perplexity was I wont to regard him from our remote pew in the gallery, as, with step solemn and slow, he ascended the pulpit! This reverend man, with countenance so demurely benign, with robes so glossy and so clerically flowing, with wig so minutely powdered, so rigid and so vast,—could this be he who, of late, with sour visage, and in snuffy habiliments, administered, ferule in hand, the Draconian Laws of the academy? Oh, gigantic paradox, too utterly monstrous for solution!

At an angle of the ponderous wall frowned a more ponderous gate. It was riveted and studded with iron bolts, and surmounted with jagged iron spikes.

What impressions of deep awe did it inspire! It was never opened save for the three periodical egressions and ingressions already mentioned; then, in every creak of its mighty hinges, we found a plenitude of mystery—a world of matter for solemn remark, or for more solemn meditation.

The extensive enclosure was irregular in form, having many capacious recesses. Of these, three or four of the largest constituted the playground. It was level, and covered with fine hard gravel. I well remember it had no trees, nor benches, nor anything similar within it. Of course it was in the rear of the house. In front lay a small parterre, planted with box and other shrubs, but through this sacred division we passed only upon rare occasions indeed—such as a first advent to school or final departure thence, or perhaps, when we joyfully took our way home for the Christmas or midsummer holidays.

But the house!—how quaint an old building was this!—to me how veritable a palace of enchantment! There was really no end to its windings—to its incomprehensible subdivisions. It was difficult, at any given time, to say with certainty upon which of its two stories one happened to be. From each room to every other there were sure to be found three or four steps either in ascent or descent. Then the lateral branches were innumerable—inconceivable—and so returning in upon themselves, that our most exact ideas in regard to the whole mansion were not very far different from those with which we pondered upon infinity. During the five years of my residence here, I was never able to ascertain with precision, in what remote locality lay the little sleeping-apartment assigned to myself and some eighteen or twenty other scholars.

The schoolroom was the largest in the house—I could not help thinking, in the world. It was very long, narrow, and dismally low, with pointed Gothic windows and a ceiling of oak. In a remote and terror-inspiring angle was a square enclosure of eight or ten feet, comprising the *sanctum*, "during hours," of our principal, the Reverend Doctor Bransby. It was a solid structure, with massy door, sooner than open which in the absence of the "Dominie," we would all have willingly perished by the *peine forte et dure*. In other angles were two other similar boxes, far less reverenced, indeed, but still greatly matters of awe. One of these was the pulpit of the "classical" usher, one of the "English and mathematical." Interspersed about the room, crossing and recrossing in endless irregularity, were innumerable benches and desks, black, ancient, and time-worn, piled desperately with much bethumbed books, and so beseamed with initial letters, names at full length, grotesque figures, and other multiplied efforts of the knife, as to have entirely lost what little of original form might have been their portion in days long departed. A huge bucket with water stood at one extremity of the room, and a clock of stupendous dimensions at the other.

ENCOMPASSED by the massy walls of this venerable academy, I passed, yet not in tedium or disgust, the years of the third lustrum of my life. The teeming brain of childhood requires no external world of incident to occupy or amuse it; and the apparently dismal monotony of a school was replete with more intense excitement than my riper youth has derived from luxury, or my full manhood from crime. Yet I must believe that my first mental development had in it much of the uncommon—even much of the *outré*.

Upon mankind at large the events of very early existence rarely leave in mature age any definite impression. All is gray shadow—a weak and irregular remembrance—an indistinct regathering of feeble pleasures and fantasmagoric pains. With me this is not so. In childhood I must have felt with the energy of a man what I now find stamped upon memory in lines as vivid, as deep, and as durable as the *exergues* of the Carthaginian medals.

Yet in fact—in the fact of the world's view—how little was there to remember! The morning's awakening, the nightly summons to bed; the connings, the recitations; the periodical half-holidays, and perambulations; the playground, with its broils, its pastimes, its intrigues;—these, by a mental sorcery long forgotten, were made to involve a wilderness of sensation, a world of rich incident, an universe of varied emotion, of excitement, the most passionate and spirit-stirring. *"Oh, le bon temps, que ce siècle de fer!"*

In truth, the ardor, the enthusiasm, and the imperiousness of my disposition soon rendered me a marked character among my schoolmates, and by slow but natural gradations gave me an ascendancy over all not greatly older than myself;—over all with a single exception. This exception was found in the person of a scholar, who, although no relation, bore the same Christian and surname as myself;—a circumstance, in fact, little remarkable; for notwithstanding a noble descent, mine was one of those everyday appellations which seem, by prescriptive right, to have been, time out of mind, the common property of the mob. In this narrative I have therefore designated myself as William Wilson,—a fictitious title not very dissimilar to the real. My namesake alone, of those who in school phraseology constituted "our set," presumed to compete with me in the studies of the class—in the sports and broils of the playground—to refuse implicit belief in my assertions, and submission to my will—indeed, to interfere with my arbitrary dictation in any respect whatsoever. If there is on earth a supreme and unqualified despotism, it is the despotism of a master-mind in boyhood over the less energetic spirits of its companions.

Wilson's rebellion was to me a source of the greatest embarrassment; the more so as, in spite of the bravado with which in public I made a point of treating him and his pretensions, I secretly felt that I feared him, and could not help thinking the equality which he maintained so easily with myself, a proof of his true superiority; since not to be overcome cost me a perpetual struggle. Yet this superiority—even this equality—was in truth acknowledged by no one but myself; our associates, by some unaccountable blindness, seemed not even to suspect it. Indeed, his competition, his resistance, and especially his impertinent and dogged interference with my purposes, were not more pointed than private. He appeared to be destitute alike of the ambition which urged, and of the passionate energy of mind which enabled me to excel. In his rivalry he might have been supposed actuated solely by a whimsical desire to thwart, astonish, or mortify myself; although there were times when I could not help observing, with a feeling made up of wonder, abasement, and pique, that he mingled with his injuries, his insults, or his contradictions, a certain most inappropriate, and assuredly most unwelcome, *affectionateness* of manner. I could only conceive this singular behavior to arise from a consummate self-conceit assuming the vulgar airs of patronage and protection.

Perhaps it was this latter trait in Wilson's conduct, conjoined with our identity of name, and the mere accident of our having entered the school upon the same day, which set afloat the notion that we were brothers, among the senior classes in the academy. These do not usually inquire with such strictness into the affairs of their juniors. I have before said, or should have said, that Wilson was not, in a most remote degree, connected with my family. But assuredly if we *had* been brothers we must have been twins; for, after leaving Doctor Bransby's, I casually learned that my namesake was born on the nineteenth of January, 1813—and this is a somewhat remarkable coincidence; for the day is precisely that of my own nativity.

It may seem strange that in spite of the continual anxiety occasioned me by the rivalry of Wilson, and his intolerable spirit of contradiction, I could not bring myself to hate him altogether. We had, to be sure, nearly every day a quarrel in which, yielding me publicly the palm of victory, he, in some manner, contrived to make me feel that it was he who had deserved it; yet a sense of pride on my part, and a veritable dignity on his own, kept us always upon what are called "speaking terms," while there were many points of strong congeniality in our tempers, operating to awake in me a sentiment which our position alone, perhaps, prevented from ripening into friendship. It is difficult, indeed, to define, or even to describe, my real feelings toward him. They formed a motley and heterogeneous admixture;—some petulant animosity, which was not yet hatred, some esteem, more respect, much fear, with a world of uneasy curiosity. To the moralist it will be necessary to say, in addition, that Wilson and myself were the most inseparable of companions.

It was no doubt the anomalous state of affairs existing between us which turned all my attacks upon him (and there were many, either open or covert) into the channel of banter or practical joke (giving pain while assuming the aspect of mere fun), rather than into a more serious and determined hostility. But my endeavors on this head were by no means uniformly successful, even when my plans were the most wittily concocted; for my namesake had much about him, in character, of that unassuming and quiet austerity which, while enjoying the poignancy of its own jokes, has no heel of Achilles in itself, and absolutely refuses to be laughed at. I could find, indeed, but one vulnerable point, and that, lying in a personal peculiarity, arising, perhaps, from constitutional disease, would have been spared by any antagonist less at his wit's end than myself;—my rival had a weakness in the facial or guttural organs, which precluded him from raising his voice at any time *above a very low whisper.* Of this defect I did not fail to take what poor advantage lay in my power.

Wilson's retaliations in kind were many; and there was one form of his practical wit that disturbed me beyond measure. How his sagacity first discovered at all that so petty a thing would vex me, is a question I never could solve; but having discovered, he habitually practised the annoyance. I had always felt aversion to my uncourtly patronymic, and its very common, if not plebeian, prænomen. The words were venom in my ears; and when, upon the day of my arrival, a second William Wilson came also to the academy, I felt angry with him for bearing the name, and doubly disgusted with the name because a stranger bore it, who would be the cause of its twofold repetition, who would be con-

stantly in my presence, and whose concerns, in the ordinary routine of the school business, must inevitably, on account of the detestable coincidence, be often confounded with my own.

The feeling of vexation thus engendered grew stronger with every circumstance tending to show resemblance, moral or physical, between my rival and myself. I had not then discovered the remarkable fact that we were of the same age; but I saw that we were of the same height, and I perceived that we were even singularly alike in general contour of person and outline of feature. I was galled, too, by the rumor touching a relationship, which had grown current in the upper forms. In a word, nothing could more seriously disturb me (although I scrupulously concealed such disturbance) than any allusion to a similarity of mind, person, or condition existing between us. But, in truth, I had no reason to believe that (with the exception of the matter of relationship, and in the case of Wilson himself) this similarity had ever been made a subject of comment, or even observed at all by our schoolfellows. That *he* observed it in all its bearings, and as fixedly as I, was apparent; but that he could discover in such circumstances so fruitful a field of annoyance, can only be attributed, as I said before, to his more than ordinary penetration.

His cue, which was to perfect an imitation of myself, lay both in words and in actions; and most admirably did he play his part. My dress it was an easy matter to copy; my gait and general manner were without difficulty appropriated; in spite of his constitutional defect, even my voice did not escape him. My louder tones were, of course, unattempted, but then the key,—it was identical; *and his singular whisper, it grew the very echo of my own.*

How greatly this most exquisite portraiture harassed me (for it could not justly be termed a caricature), I will not now venture to describe. I had but one consolation—in the fact that the imitation, apparently, was noticed by myself alone, and that I had to endure only the knowing and strangely sarcastic smiles of my namesake himself. Satisfied with having produced in my bosom the intended effect, he seemed to chuckle in secret over the sting he had inflicted, and was characteristically disregardful of the public applause which the success of his witty endeavors might have so easily elicited. That the school, indeed, did not feel his design, perceive its accomplishment, and participate in his sneer, was, for many anxious months, a riddle I could not resolve. Perhaps the *gradation* of his copy rendered it not readily perceptible; or, more possibly, I owed my security to the masterly air of the copyist, who, disdaining the letter (which in a painting is all the obtuse can see), gave but the full spirit of his original for my individual contemplation and chagrin.

I HAVE already more than once spoken of the disgusting air of patronage which he assumed toward me, and of his frequent officious interference with my will. This interference often took the ungracious character of advice; advice not openly given, but hinted or insinuated. I received it with a repugnance which gained strength as I grew in years. Yet, at this distant day, let me do him the simple justice to acknowledge that I can recall no occasion when the suggestions of my rival were on the side of those errors or follies so usual to his immature age and seeming inexperience; that his moral sense, at least, if not his general talents and worldly wisdom, was far keener than my own; and that I might, today, have

been a better and thus a happier man, had I less frequently rejected the counsels embodied in those meaning whispers which I then but too cordially hated and too bitterly despised.

As it was I at length grew restive in the extreme under his distasteful supervision, and daily resented more and more openly what I considered his intolerable arrogance. I have said that, in the first years of our connection as schoolmates, my feelings in regard to him might have been easily ripened into friendship; but, in the latter months of my residence at the academy, although the intrusion of his ordinary manner had, beyond doubt, in some measure abated, my sentiments, in nearly similar proportion, partook very much of positive hatred. Upon one occasion he saw this, I think, and afterward avoided, or made a show of avoiding me.

It was about the same period, if I remember aright, that, in an altercation of violence with him, in which he was more than usually thrown off his guard, and spoke and acted with an openness of demeanor rather foreign to his nature, I discovered, or fancied I discovered, in his accent, in his air, and general appearance, a something which first startled, and then deeply interested me, by bringing to mind dim visions of my earliest infancy —wild, confused, and thronging memories of a time when memory herself was yet unborn. I cannot better describe the sensation which oppressed me, than by saying that I could with difficulty shake off the belief of my having been acquainted with the being who stood before me, at some epoch very long ago—some point of the past even infinitely remote. The delusion, however, faded as rapidly as it came; and I mention it at all but to define the day of the last conversation I there held with my singular namesake.

The huge old house, with its countless subdivisions, had several large chambers communicating with each other, where slept the greater number of the students. There were, however (as must necessarily happen in a building so awkwardly planned), many little nooks or recesses, the odds and ends of the structure; and these the economic ingenuity of Doctor Bransby had also fitted up as dormitories; although, being the merest closets, they were capable of accommodating but a single individual. One of these small apartments was occupied by Wilson.

One night, about the close of my fifth year at the school, and immediately after the altercation just mentioned, finding everyone wrapped in sleep, I arose from bed, and, lamp in hand, stole through a wilderness of narrow passages, from my own bedroom to that of my rival. I had long been plotting one of those ill-natured pieces of practical wit at his expense in which I had hitherto been so uniformly unsuccessful. It was my intention, now, to put my scheme in operation, and I resolved to make him feel the whole extent of the malice with which I was imbued. Having reached his closet, I noiselessly entered, leaving the lamp, with a shade over it, on the outside. I advanced a step and listened to the sound of his tranquil breathing. Assured of his being asleep, I returned, took the light, and with it again approached the bed. Close curtains were around it, which, in the prosecution of my plan, I slowly and quietly withdrew, when the bright rays fell vividly upon the sleeper, and my eyes at the same moment upon his countenance.

I looked;—and a numbness, an iciness of feeling instantly pervaded my frame. My breast heaved, my knees tottered, my whole spirit became possessed with an objectless yet intolerable horror. Gasping

for breath, I lowered the lamp in still nearer proximity to the face. Were these —*these* the lineaments of William Wilson? I saw, indeed, that they were his, but I shook as if with a fit of the ague, in fancying they were not. What *was* there about them to confound me in this manner? I gazed;—while my brain reeled with a multitude of incoherent thoughts. Not thus he appeared, assuredly not *thus* —in the vivacity of his waking hours. The same name! the same contour of person! the same day of arrival at the academy! And then his dogged and meaningless imitation of my gait, my voice, my habits, and my manner! Was it, in truth, within the bounds of human possibility, that *what I now saw* was the result, merely, of the habitual practise of this sarcastic imitation? Awe-stricken, and with a creeping shudder, I extinguished the lamp, passed silently from the chamber, and left, at once, the halls of that old academy, never to enter them again.

After a lapse of some months, spent at home in mere idleness, I found myself a student at Eton. The brief interval had been sufficient to enfeeble my remembrance of the events at Doctor Bransby's, or at least to effect a material change in the nature of the feelings with which I remembered them. The truth—the tragedy—of the drama was no more. I could now find room to doubt the evidence of my senses; and seldom called up the subject at all but with wonder at the extent of human credulity, and a smile at the vivid force of the imagination which I hereditarily possessed. Neither was this species of skepticism likely to be diminished by the character of the life I led at Eton. The vortex of thoughtless folly into which I there so immediately and so recklessly plunged, washed away all but the froth of my past hours, ingulfed at once every solid or serious impression, and left to memory only the veriest levities of a former existence.

I do not wish, however, to trace the course of my miserable profligacy here—a profligacy which set at defiance the laws, while it eluded the vigilance, of the institution. Three years of folly, passed without profit, had but given me rooted habits of vice, and added, in a somewhat unusual degree, to my bodily stature, when, after a week of soulless dissipation, I invited a small party of the most dissolute students to a secret carousal in my chambers. We met at a late hour of the night; for our debaucheries were to be faithfully protracted until morning. The wine flowed freely, and there were not wanting other and perhaps more dangerous seductions; so that the gray dawn had already faintly appeared in the east while our delirious extravagance was at its height. Madly flushed with cards and intoxication, I was in the act of insisting upon a toast of more than wonted profanity, when my attention was suddenly diverted by the violent, although partial, unclosing of the door of the apartment, and by the eager voice of a servant from without. He said that some person, apparently in great haste, demanded to speak with me in the hall.

Wildly excited with wine, the unexpected interruption rather delighted than surprized me. I staggered forward at once, and a few steps brought me to the vestibule of the building. In this low and small room there hung no lamp; and now no light at all was admitted, save that of the exceedingly feeble dawn which made its way through the semicircular window. As I put my foot over the threshold, I became aware of the figure of a youth about my own height, and habited in a white kerseymere morning frock, cut in the novel fashion of the one I myself wore at the moment. This the

faint light enabled me to perceive; but the features of his face I could not distinguish. Upon my entering, he strode hurriedly up to me, and, seizing me by the arm with a gesture of petulant impatience, whispered the words "William Wilson" in my ear.

I grew perfectly sober in an instant.

There was that in the manner of the stranger, and in the tremulous shake of his uplifted finger, as he held it between my eyes and the light, which filled me with unqualified amazement; but it was not this which had so violently moved me. It was the pregnancy of solemn admonition in the singular, low, hissing utterance; and, above all, it was the character, the tone, *the key,* of those few, simple, and familiar, yet *whispered* syllables, which came with a thousand thronging memories of bygone days, and struck upon my soul with the shock of a galvanic battery. Ere I could recover the use of my senses he was gone.

ALTHOUGH this event failed not of a vivid effect upon my disordered imagination, yet was it evanescent as vivid. For some weeks, indeed, I busied myself in earnest enquiry, or was wrapped in a cloud of morbid speculation. I did not pretend to disguise from my perception the identity of the singular individual who thus perseveringly interfered with my affairs, and harassed me with his insinuated counsel. But who and what was this Wilson? — and whence came he?—and what were his purposes? Upon neither of these points could I be satisfied—merely ascertaining, in regard to him, that a sudden accident in his family had caused his removal from Doctor Bransby's academy on the afternoon of the day in which I myself had eloped. But in a brief period I ceased to think upon the subject, my attention being all absorbed in a contemplated departure for Oxford. Thither I soon went, the uncalculating vanity of my parents furnishing me with an outfit and annual establishment, which would enable me to indulge at will in the luxury already so dear to my heart—to vie in profuseness of expenditure with the haughtiest heirs of the wealthiest earldoms in Great Britain.

Excited by such appliances to vice, my constitutional temperament broke forth with redoubled ardor, and I spurned even the common restraints of decency in the mad infatuation of my revels. But it were absurd to pause in the detail of my extravagance. Let it suffice, that among spendthrifts I out-Heroded Herod, and that, giving name to a multitude of novel follies, I added no brief appendix to the long catalogue of vices then usual in the most dissolute university of Europe.

It could hardly be credited, however, that I had, even here, so utterly fallen from the gentlemanly estate as to seek acquaintance with the vilest arts of the gambler by profession, and, having become an adept in his despicable science, to practise it habitually as a means of increasing my already enormous income at the expense of the weak-minded among my fellow-collegians. Such, nevertheless, was the fact. And the very enormity of this offense against all manly and honorable sentiment proved, beyond doubt, the main if not the sole reason of the impunity with which it was committed. Who, indeed, among my most abandoned associates, would not rather have disputed the clearest evidence of his senses, than have suspected of such courses, the gay, the frank, the generous William Wilson—the noblest and most liberal commoner at Oxford—him whose follies (said his parasites) were but the follies of youth and unbridled fancy—whose

(Please turn to page 644)

COMING NEXT MONTH

IN ONE corner of the dungeon a cluster of rusty chains hung from a great iron ring set in the stone. In these chains a skeleton dangled. Conan glared at it with some curiosity, noticing the state of the bare bones, most of which were splintered and broken; the skull, which had fallen from the vertebræ, was crushed as if by some savage blow of tremendous force.

Stolidly one of the blacks removed the chains from the ring, using his key on the massive lock, and dragged the mass of rusty metal and shattered bones over to one side. Then they fastened Conan's chains to that ring, and the third black turned his key in the lock of the further door, grunting when he had assured himself that it was properly fastened.

Then they regarded Conan cryptically, slit-eyed ebony giants, the torch striking highlights from their glossy skin.

He who held the key to the nearer door remarked, gutturally: "This is your palace now, white dog-king. You will live and die here, maybe. Like him!" He contemptuously kicked the shattered skull and sent it clattering across the stone floor.

Conan did not deign to reply to the taunt, and the black, galled by his prisoner's silence, stooped and spat full in the king's face. It was an unfortunate move for the black. Conan was seated on the floor, the chains about his waist; ankles and wrists locked to the ring in the wall. He could neither rise, nor move more than a yard out from the wall. But there was considerable slack in the chains that shackled his wrists, and before the bullet-shaped head could be withdrawn out of reach, Conan gathered this slack in his mighty hand and smote the black on the head. The man fell like a butchered ox, and his companions stared to see him lying with his scalp laid open and blood oozing from his nose and ears. But they attempted no reprisal. . . .

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William Wilson

(Continued from page 642)

errors but inimitable whim—whose darkest vice but a careless and dashing extravagance?

I had been now two years successfully busied in this way, when there came to the university a young *parvenu* nobleman, Glendenning—rich, said report, as Herodes Atticus—his riches, too, as easily acquired. I soon found him of weak intellect, and, of course, marked him as a fitting subject for my skill. I frequently engaged him in play, and contrived, with the gambler's usual art, to let him win considerable sums, the more effectually to entangle him in my snares. At length, my schemes being ripe, I met him (with the full intention that this meeting should be final and decisive) at the chambers of a fellow-commoner (Mr. Preston), equally intimate with both, but who, to do him justice, entertained not even a remote suspicion of my design. To give to this a better coloring, I had contrived to have assembled a party of some eight or ten, and was solicitously careful that the introduction of cards should appear accidental, and originate in the proposal of my contemplated dupe himself. To be brief upon a vile topic, none of the low finesse was omitted, so customary upon similar occasions, that it is a just matter for wonder how any are still found so besotted as to fall its victim.

We had protracted our sitting far into the night, and I had at length effected the maneuver of getting Glendenning as my sole antagonist. The game, too, was my favorite *écarté*. The rest of the company, interested in the extent of our play, had abandoned their own cards, and were standing around us as spectators. The *parvenu*, who had been induced by my artifices in the early part of the evening to drink deeply, now shuffled, dealt, or played, with a wild nervousness of manner for which his intoxication, I thought, might partially, but could not altogether, account. In a very short period he had become my debtor to a large amount, when, having taken a long draft of port, he did precisely what I had been coolly anticipating—he proposed to double our already extravagant stakes. With a well-feigned show of reluctance, and not until after my repeated refusal had seduced him into some angry words which gave a color of pique to my compliance, did I finally comply. The result, of course, did but prove how entirely the prey was in my toils: in less than an hour he had quadrupled his debt.

For some time his countenance had been losing the florid tinge lent it by the wine; but now, to my astonishment, I perceived that it had grown to a pallor truly fearful. I say, to my astonishment. Glendenning had been represented to my eager inquiries as immeasurably wealthy; and the sums which he had as yet lost, although in themselves vast, could not, I supposed, very seriously annoy, much less so violently affect him. That he was overcome by the wine just swallowed was the idea which most readily presented itself; and, rather with a view to the preservation of my own character in the eyes of my associates, than from any less interested motive, I was about to insist, peremptorily, upon a discontinuance of the play, when some expressions at my elbow from among the company, and an ejaculation evincing utter despair on the part of Glendenning, gave me to understand that I had effected his total ruin under circumstances which, rendering him an object for the pity of all, should have protected him from the ill offices even of a fiend.

WHAT now might have been my conduct it is difficult to say. The pitiable condition of my dupe had thrown an air of embarrassed gloom over all; and, for some moments, a profound silence was maintained, during which I could not help feeling my cheeks tingle with the many burning glances of scorn or reproach cast upon me by the less abandoned of the party. I will even own that an intolerable weight of anxiety was for a brief instant lifted from my bosom by the sudden and extraordinary interruption which ensued. The wide, heavy folding-doors of the apartment were all at once thrown open, to their full extent, with a vigorous and rushing impetuosity that extinguished, as if by magic, every candle in the room. Their light, in dying, enabled us just to perceive that a stranger had entered, about my own height, and closely muffled in a cloak. The darkness, however, was not total; and we could only *feel* that he was standing in our midst. Before any one of us could recover from the extreme astonishment into which this rudeness had thrown all, we heard the voice of the intruder.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a low, distinct, and never-to-be-forgotten *whisper* which thrilled to the very marrow of my bones, "gentlemen, I make no apology for this behavior, because in thus behaving, I am fulfilling a duty. You are, beyond doubt, uninformed of the true character of the person who has tonight won at *écarté* a large sum of money from Lord Glendenning. I will therefore put you upon an expeditious and decisive plan of obtaining this very necessary information. Please to examine, at your leisure, the inner linings of the cuff of his left sleeve, and the several little packages which may be found in the somewhat capacious pockets of his embroidered morning wrapper."

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While he spoke, so profound was the stillness that one might have heard a pin drop upon the floor. In ceasing, he departed at once, and as abruptly as he had entered. Can I—shall I describe my sensations? Must I say that I felt all the horrors of the damned? Most assuredly I had little time for reflection. Many hands roughly seized me upon the spot, and lights were immediately reproduced. A search ensued. In the lining of my sleeve were found all the court cards essential in *écarté*, and, in the pockets of my wrapper, a number of packs, facsimiles of those used at our sittings, with the single exception that mine were of the species called, technically, *arrondées;* the honors being slightly convex at the sides. In this disposition, the dupe who cuts, as customary, at the length of the pack, will invariably find that he cuts his antagonist an honor; while the gambler, cutting at the breadth, will, as certainly, cut nothing for his victim which may count in the records of the game.

Any burst of indignation upon this discovery would have affected me less than the silent contempt, or the sarcastic composure, with which it was received.

"Mr. Wilson," said our host, stooping to remove from beneath his feet an exceedingly luxurious cloak of rare furs, "Mr. Wilson, this is your property." (The weather was cold; and, upon quitting my own room, I had thrown a cloak over my dressing-wrapper, putting it off upon reaching the scene of play.) "I presume it is supererogatory to seek here (eyeing the folds of the garment with a bitter smile) for any farther evidence of your skill. Indeed, we have had enough. You will see the necessity, I hope, of quitting Oxford—at all events, of quitting instantly my chambers."

Abased, humbled to the dust as I then was, it is probable that I should have resented this galling language by immediate personal violence, had not my whole attention been at the moment arrested by a fact of the most startling character. The cloak which I had worn was of a rare description of fur; how rare, how extravagantly costly, I shall not venture to say. Its fashion, too, was of my own fantastic invention; for I was fastidious to an absurd degree of coxcombry, in matters of this frivolous nature. When, therefore, Mr. Preston reached me that which he had picked up upon the floor, and near the folding-doors of the apartment, it was with an astonishment nearly bordering upon terror, that I perceived my own already hanging on my arm (where I had no doubt unwittingly placed it), and that the one presented me was but its exact counterpart in even the minutest possible particular. The singular being who had so disastrously exposed me had been muffled, I remembered, in a cloak; and none had been worn at all by any of the members of our party, with the exception of myself. Retaining some presence of mind, I took the one offered me by Preston; placed it, unnoticed, over my own; left the apartment with a resolute scowl of defiance; and, next morning ere dawn of day, commenced a hurried journey from Oxford to the continent, in a perfect agony of horror and of shame.

I FLED in vain. My evil destiny pursued me as if in exultation, and proved, indeed, that the exercise of its mysterious dominion had as yet only begun. Scarcely had I set foot in Paris, ere I had fresh evidence of the detestable interest taken by this Wilson in my concerns. Years flew, while I experienced no relief. Villain!—at Rome, with how untimely, yet with how spectral an officiousness, stepped he in between me and my am-

bition! at Vienna, too—at Berlin—and at Moscow! Where, in truth, had I *not* bitter cause to curse him within my heart? From his inscrutable tyranny did I at length flee, panic-stricken, as from a pestilence; and to the very ends of the earth *I fled in vain*.

And again, and again, in secret communion with my own spirit, would I demand the questions, "Who is he?—whence came he?—and what are his objects?" But no answer was there found. And now I scrutinized, with a minute scrutiny, the forms, and the methods, and the leading traits of his impertinent supervision. But even here there was very little upon which to base a conjecture. It was noticeable, indeed, that, in no one of the multiplied instances in which he had of late crossed my path, had he so crossed it except to frustrate those schemes, or to disturb those actions, which, if fully carried out, might have resulted in bitter mischief. Poor justification this, in truth, for an authority so imperiously assumed! Poor indemnity for natural rights of self-agency so pertinaciously, so insultingly denied!

I had also been forced to notice that my tormenter, for a very long period of time (while scrupulously and with miraculous dexterity maintaining his whim of an identity of apparel with myself), had so contrived it, in the execution of his varied interference with my will, that I saw not, at any moment, the features of his face. Be Wilson what he might, *this*, at least, was but the veriest of affectation, or of folly. Could he, for an instant, have supposed that, in my admonisher at Eton,—in the destroyer of my honor at Oxford,—in him who thwarted my ambition at Rome, my revenge at Paris, my passionate love at Naples, or what he falsely termed my avarice in Egypt,—that in this, my arch-enemy and evil genius, I could

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fail to recognize the William Wilson of my schoolboy days,—the namesake, the companion, the rival,—the hated and dreaded rival at Doctor Bransby's? Impossible!—But let me hasten to the last eventful scene of the drama.

Thus far I had succumbed supinely to this imperious domination. The sentiment of deep awe with which I habitually regarded the elevated character, the majestic wisdom, the apparent omnipresence and omnipotence of Wilson, added to a feeling of even terror with which certain other traits in his nature and assumptions inspired me, had operated, hitherto, to impress me with an idea of my own utter weakness and helplessness, and to suggest an implicit, although bitterly reluctant submission to his arbitrary will. But, of late days, I had given myself up entirely to wine; and its maddening influence upon my hereditary temper rendered me more and more impatient of control. I began to murmur,—to hesitate,—to resist. And was it only fancy which induced me to believe that, with the increase of my own firmness, that of my tormenter underwent a proportional diminution? Be this as it may, I now began to feel the inspiration of a burning hope, and at length nurtured in my secret thoughts a stern and desperate resolution that I would submit no longer to be enslaved.

It was at Rome, during the Carnival of 18—, that I attended a masquerade in the palazzo of the Neapolitan Duke Di Broglio. I had indulged more freely than usual in the excesses of the wine-table; and now the suffocating atmosphere of the crowded rooms irritated me beyond endurance. The difficulty, too, of forcing my way through the mazes of the company contributed not a little to the ruffling of my temper; for I was anxiously seeking (let me not say with what unworthy motive) the young, the gay, the beautiful wife of the aged and doting Di Broglio. With a too unscrupulous confidence she had previously communicated to me the secret of the costume in which she would be habited, and now, having caught a glimpse of her person, I was hurrying to make my way into her presence. At this moment I felt a light hand placed upon my shoulder, and that ever-remembered, low, damnable *whisper* within my ear.

In an absolute frenzy of wrath, I turned at once upon him who had thus interrupted me, and seized him violently by the collar. He was attired, as I had expected, in a costume altogether similar to my own; wearing a Spanish cloak of blue velvet, begirt about the waist with a crimson belt sustaining a rapier. A mask of black silk entirely covered his face.

"Scoundrel!" I said, in a voice husky with rage, while every syllable I uttered seemed as new fuel to my fury; "scoundrel! impostor! accursed villain! you shall not—you *shall not* dog me unto death! Follow me, or I stab you where you stand!"—and I broke my way from the ballroom into a small ante-chamber adjoining, dragging him unresistingly with me as I went.

Upon entering, I thrust him furiously from me. He staggered against the wall, while I closed the door with an oath, and commanded him to draw. He hesitated but for an instant; then, with a slight sigh, drew in silence, and put himself upon his defense.

The contest was brief indeed. I was frantic with every species of wild excitement, and felt within my single arm the energy and power of a multitude. In a few seconds I forced him by sheer strength against the wainscotting, and

thus, getting him at mercy, plunged my sword, with brute ferocity, repeatedly through and through his bosom.

At that instant some person tried the latch of the door. I hastened to prevent an intrusion, and then immediately returned to my dying antagonist. But what human language can adequately portray *that* astonishment, *that* horror which possessed me at the spectacle then presented to view? The brief moment in which I averted my eyes had been sufficient to produce, apparently, a material change in the arrangements at the upper or farther end of the room. A large mirror—so at first it seemed to me in my confusion—now stood where none had been perceptible before; and as I stepped up to it in extremity of terror, mine own image, but with features all pale and dabbled in blood, advanced to meet me with a feeble and tottering gait.

Thus it appeared, I say, but was not. It was my antagonist—it was Wilson, who then stood before me in the agonies of his dissolution. His mask and cloak lay, where he had thrown them, upon the floor. Not a thread in all his raiment—not a line in all the marked and singular lineaments of his face which was not, even in the most absolute identity, *mine own!*

It was Wilson; but he spoke no longer in a whisper, and I could have fancied that I myself was speaking while he said:

"You have conquered, and I yield. Yet henceforward art thou also dead—dead to the World, to Heaven, and to Hope! In me didst thou exist—and, in my death, see by this image, which is thine own, how utterly thou hast murdered thyself."

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YOU, the readers of WEIRD TALES, have stamped the seal of your approval on Paul Ernst's series of stories about Doctor Satan, the world's weirdest criminal. A few of you do not like the series, but the bulk of your letters voices hearty commendation of the tales about the weird malefactor, and many of you are enthusiastic about him. Some of you, while praising the series, adjure us to keep the Doctor Satan stories weird, and caution us against letting them deteriorate into ordinary detective stories. Mr. Ernst promises to keep the series weird, weirder, and weirdest. The following letters give a fair cross-section of the comments on Doctor Satan's exploits.

Kind Words for Doctor Satan

Henry Kuttner writes from Beverly Hills, California: "The August issue is a good one. I was glad to see that old war-horse, Edgar Daniel Kramer, in it. Also the reprint was well chosen. Best story, L. M. Montgomery's *The House Party at Smoky Island*. Very clever yarn. *Doctor Satan*, too, was engaging; I hope the series will continue. The worthy Doctor, I was glad to see, doesn't go in for turgid melodrama and juvenile Fu Manchu stuff; moreover, Keane is as interesting as his antagonist, and not the usual damn fool detective. C. A. Smith managed to inject the right note of nightmare realism into his yarn about Quachil Uttaus. . . . In the September issue, Robert Bloch gets my vote for the best story. The chap has a masterly control of adjectives."

Against Doctor Satan

Carl E. Woolard, of Flint, Michigan, writes: "Nothing else to do, so I'll sit down and whack out a letter to good old WT. Probably by now you are receiving many a protest about *Doctor Satan*, and I hereby add mine. Now I'm not objecting to it because it is a detective story, although many will, but because it is *punk*. Any series of stories in which a master crook and a master detective match wits is bound to be poor. No matter what happens, the readers always know that in the next story the crook (or the detective) will have escaped. When one finishes reading such a story, he merely says to himself, 'So what?' I think that you will soon realize your mistake in inaugurating this series of stories. What has become of that master of fantasy, H. P. Lovecraft? There has been nothing new from him in WEIRD TALES for over a year. Let's have a long novelette from him, or several short stories."

That Satanic Doctor Again

J. J. O'Donnell, of New York City, writes: "Bearing in mind all the ballyhoo and press-agentry that preceded the publication of the series of stories about Doctor Satan, it was with many misgivings that I started to read the first story about this much-heralded character, 'the world's weirdest criminal.' It seemed to me that any series of stories must be pretty weak if it required so much advance publicity to put it across. My misgivings were increased by the fact that the tales were to be 'detective' stories—odious word! But I had not read two pages before I was under the spell of the story, and when I finished reading it, it left me 'panting for more,' as you phrased it so delicately in your ballyhoo in the Eyrie. This may sound like sarcasm, but I assure you it is not meant as such (except my use of the word 'delicately'). Honestly and frankly, I have not enjoyed any story so much in a long time as I enjoyed reading *Doctor Satan*,

even admitting that it is sheer melodrama. But what melodrama! Paul Ernst, its author, is to be congratulated. He wisely placed the emphasis on the criminal rather than on the detective; and by endowing both antagonists with powers and knowledge beyond the reach of any but the most highly developed mystics, he has succeeded in obtaining weird effects that would otherwise be impossible. The stories—if I may judge by the first two—are intrinsically weird, which other detective stories are not. Really, Ascott Keane is so far above all other detectives of fiction (including Sherlock Holmes and Monsieur Lecoq) in his mastery of weird powers and his knowledge of occult forces, that he should not even be called a 'detective,' but a 'criminologist.' And, just as Ascott Keane excels all other detectives of fiction, Doctor Satan himself surpasses Fu Manchu and all the other fictitious villains that I have ever encountered in my reading. I wish a long career to this pernicious criminal and his remarkable adversary."

Death of a Poet

Once again it becomes our sad duty to record the death of a valued contributor. Robert Nelson died at his home in St. Charles, Illinois, after a two-weeks' illness. Though he was a young man in his early twenties, he had developed a deep poetic feeling and a keen sensitivity to the overtones and undertones of words, which made his verse stand out boldly from among the average magazine poetry. He received his first encouragement from no less a poet than Clark Ashton Smith himself. His work gave clear promise that he would some day occupy an important place among the great poets; a promise that now—alas!—can never be fulfilled.

Jack Writes a Letter

Jack Darrow, of Chicago, writes: "*Once in a Thousand Years* by Frances Bragg Middleton is my favorite in the August issue. I enjoyed it immensely. Good plot and nicely written. . . . Yes, the Doctor Satan stories are weird (at least the first). I am eagerly looking forward to the next. *The House Party at Smoky Island* was an enjoyable short. Well written, too. Napoli and Binder did well in illustrating this issue. If only you would have a variety of artists on the cover as you do inside."

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New Novel by Jack Williamson

B. M. Reynolds, of North Adams, Massachusetts, writes, in part: "The Doctor Satan stories are a perfect example of the weird-detective tale. By all means continue with these, but please dispense with all others, never more than one of this type to an issue. . . . I thoroughly enjoyed reading Hamilton's *The Monster-God of Mamurth* over again. That was a real treat. Contrary to previous criticism, Robert Bloch deserves plenty of praise for *The Shambler from the Stars*. Now why doesn't Mr. Lovecraft return the compliment, and dedicate a story to the author? I'm sure most of us would suggest anything to get a new story from him. *Vulthoom* by Clark Ashton Smith was his best this year. Smith's work is always consistently good, whether his locale is the dim past, the far future, or interplanetary. Am still looking for a new novel by Jack Williamson on the type of *Golden Blood*." [You will have the new novel by Jack Williamson soon. It is entitled *The Ruler of Fate*, and is a weird story that will surely fascinate you.—THE EDITOR.]

Without a Flaw

C. B. H. writes from New York City: "I was so surprized and pleased at seeing your wonderful covers once more. Who ever thought of the name, 'The Unique Magazine,' sure was right. As much as I look I can never find a flaw in WEIRD TALES, now that the perfect covers are back. I was pleased to find a second Doctor Satan story. I had often seen in the Eyrie letters asking for *The Monster-God of Mamurth*, and upon reading it was greatly pleased. The short stories were excellent, as usual."

Out of the Eons

W. C. Levere, of West Haven, Connecticut, writes: "After reading *Out of the Eons* I looked through six years' supply of WEIRD TALES, hoping to find its equal. It was a hard search; however, a few stories were found that surpassed it—thanks to Lovecraft and that extraordinary literary philosopher of the abnormal, Clark Ashton Smith. Congratulations are in order for a story like that one. Please retain Author Heald for a few more. Not the least of its many merits, the literary quality alone should make that story live to be remembered. The covers by Brundage are a great improvement over many of 1933's issues. I notice that Hamilton is writing better than a year or so ago—*The Monster-God of Mamurth* was very nearly his best. Jules de Grandin should appear more often. I hope that WEIRD TALES remains the same and doesn't succumb to the prosaic plundering of universes that we can find elsewhere."

In All Their Curvy Clarity

Forrest J. Ackerman writes from Hollywood, California: "Perhaps you would be interested in my comment on your covers, as a disinterested observer. As far back as I can remember, they have featured unclad heroines. Your contention seems to be, 'Clothes make the woman—ordinary!' Yesteryear, your covers were not so controversial because, though nude, the hapless heroines were more vaguely, indistinctly illustrated. Then came the Brundage beauties, in all their curvy clarity! And I have followed, with amusement, the resultant endless argument. Reader Robson, in your September issue, sums up for the opposition in what I should hazard will become a famous phrase: 'After all, the thrill of viewing a nude isn't exactly a weird one.' Ponder that. Maddening as a Minga-maiden, the fascinating feminine form on the cover is truly tantalizing. Fortunately, I can appreciate such pulchritude, as I am not a fanatic about whether your covers are fantastic or not. I am principally interested in CLMoore and your science fiction. But were I a weird-art enthusiast, I suspect I should say the scene selected for the cover did not represent the spirit (or spirits) of WEIRD TALES' contents. It shows, simply: Peeping Tom startling Miss America as she emerges from her suitless swim. The Blue Woman is a gorgeous girl—but she is not *blue!* She's flesh-colored, not phosphorescent. So how is she weird? Surely Tom's unbeautiful face alone doesn't make the cover eery. Wouldn't an illustration from *The Shambler from the Stars* have been eminently more in the mood for *Weird* Tales?"

Robert Bloch's Plots

Paul S. Smith, of Orange, New Jersey, writes: "For some time past I have found that the shorter stories—often by less familiar authors—which appear in your magazine are the most entertaining and original of all

you publish. In the September issue *One Chance* was, I think, a little gem of a story and decidedly the best in the issue. . . . Among your newer regular contributors I think that Robert Bloch is one of the best and most promising; but his latest story, *The Shambler from the Stars*, is far from satisfactory. A man conjures up a monster and the monster kills him. Well, what about it? The idea, it seems to me, is too fragmentary to form the plot of a good story. I think that Mr. Bloch's one weakness lies in the fact that he tends to work with plots that are too simple. If he will keep his stories as weird as he has up to the present and try to devise plots which are more involved and complicated, I believe he will develop into a very fine writer. (All this is intended to be friendly and not fault-finding criticism.) *The Monster-God of Mamurth* made a good reprint, as it is undoubtedly one of Hamilton's best. Since I have made a number of adverse criticisms, I will conclude my remarks by saying that ever since 1924 WEIRD TALES has probably given me more pleasure than any other magazine I have ever read—and it still does."

Against The Blue Woman

L. A. Chapin, of Aberdeen, South Dakota, writes: "I wish to register my first kick. I do not think *The Blue Woman* belongs in WEIRD TALES. I have read better in the commonplace detective magazines. . . . As it is my policy to read serials only after I have all parts, I will not pass on Eadie's tale. I know it will be good. The two tales by Smith and Ernst rank first with me in the September issue, with no preference. Reprint excellent."

Those Brundage Nudes

Walter Scheible, of Monticello, New York, writes: "I have been reading WEIRD TALES for over a year now, and I have also read some of the old issues of several years back. The older issues cannot compare with the issues you are putting out at the present time. The modern stories are of a much higher literary quality than were the old ones. In the old days you had a very few authors who could equal Lovecraft, Moore and Howard. You had no such stories as the Conan series, or the stories of Jirel of Joiry. The old mags didn't have as good covers as the present issues, either. Mrs.

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Brundage's covers have never been surpassed. I also prefer the new-type contents page to the old double-page type. All in all, the mag can't be beaten. It is truly *the unique magazine*. It is the only mag of its type on the news stands today. As far as the controversy over the covers goes, I am entirely in favor of having one of Mrs. Brundage's nudes every month, and not just once in a while."

Satan in Exile a Fine Yarn

James Kershaw, of New York City, writes: "I have been a reader of WEIRD TALES for about eight years, and consider it quite the most interesting of the various publications available. As to the type of stories I prefer, I must admit that I enjoy them all, with the exception of interplanetary tales. However, the current serial, *Satan in Exile*, is undeniably an excellent yarn, the August installment being my favorite in that issue. There has been quite a controversy raging in the Eyrie over the type of illustrations that should adorn the covers of WEIRD TALES. I am indifferent as to what sort of designs you use, being more influenced by the reading-matter between the pages than by usually unsuccessful weird portrayals on the cover."

Can This Be Sarcasm?

Marshall Lewer, of New York City, writes: "For some time I have been meaning to write an extensive letter offering advice on how to run your magazine (which I am sure will be handsomely appreciated) and treat its allied problems. I feel sure that you will readily see that, although you have had the valuable experience of actually publishing an addition to the current literature of our times, an intelligent commentary on important details will help to relieve your problems. I am intensely interested in that happy carefree discussion of your policy that one finds so frequently in the Eyrie. We, the readers, sometimes have fears that WEIRD TALES will degenerate into just another detective magazine, and we are very glad to read your assurances to the contrary. And, to enter into a more personal degree of opinion, may I make a request for another of Quinn's charming little stories? Although the incessant repetition of one plot, *id est*, a supple-limbed girl rescued from some eery fate by the almost supermundane exertions of our little Frenchman, Jules de Grandin, almost wearies one, still the incomparable delight of turning the last page of the tale is well worth the trouble; it feels so good when it stops. Another character that is truly remarkable in his way is Conan—named the Chipmunk by that amiable young author of yours, Robert Bloch. Here also we are sure to have supple-limbed girls in profusion, one of whom is sure to make the cover, and an enthralling horror will give them a run for their money before the story closes. In my genuine desire to assist the development of the Eyrie I have decided to write a truly horrible tale. It will start: 'Despite the graven grins of the grotesque green gargoyles. . . .' Closing with that unique little morsel!"

Strong for Doctor Satan

Walter L. Reeve writes from a CCC camp in Massachusetts: "Just finished reading the September issue of WT. My favorite story is *The Man Who Chained the Lightning*, followed by *The Carnival of Death* and *Vulthoom*. I am strong for Doctor Satan. WT needs that type of story. *The Blue Woman* is good, but I knew the answer, so the weird effect was gone. The shorts were excellent too. I suppose *The Carnival of Death* is Arlton Eadie's final story in WT. His death is a great loss to WT. Be sure and have Clark Ashton Smith write a sequel to *Vulthoom*, and also some more about Prince Satan by Bernal. The covers are very fine, though I think the August cover was better than the September one."

Thirty-one Cents in Mexico

William T. Carnehan, of Torreon, Mexico, writes: "I have just finished reading your latest issue, and wish to congratulate you on what I consider easily the best story in it, *Vulthoom* by Clark Ashton Smith. It seems to me infinitely superior to any other tale I have ever read, even in your own magazine, of the so-called weird-scientific variety. The plot is only a fair one; but its exposition is most intelligent and workmanlike, and the finish is of a masterful simplicity that commands praise. *The Man Who Chained the Lightning* is consistently excellent; but I was sadly disappointed in Douglas's *Blue Woman*. . . . The reprint was very good, as were at least two of the

so-called 'filler' stories: *One Chance,* by E. H. Coen, and Bloch's *Shambler from the Stars.* Kirk Mashburn's notion, in *The Toad Idol,* of inexplicably appearing pebbles hurled through the back of one's head by a stone toad and bruising one's brain was not, to me, a particularly happy one. By the way, in the Eyrie of the July issue there appeared the statement that WT costs, in Mexico City, $1.10. While this is absolutely correct, you must realize that the sign $ stands for both dollars and pesos: in this particular case, WEIRD TALES costs there one peso and ten centavos, or some thirty-one cents."

Too Much Science Fiction

Julius Hopkins, of Washington, D. C., writes: "Without a doubt the reprint, *In Amundsen's Tent,* stands out as the very best story printed in the August WT—but inasmuch as we are choosing from the latest stories, I award first place to *The Drome of the Living Dead* and second to *Once in a Thousand Years.* It seems to me that you are printing too many scientific stories of late. I wish you would slow up on these. *Doctor Satan* would be good if it wasn't for the fact that the science in it weakens the stimulated imagination that the weird incidents have built up. I am really disappointed in Mr. Quinn's latest de Grandin tale. He leads us to believe that there is a curse called down on Sorensen that will be fulfilled in a supernatural way, but, alas, he gives us just a scientific explanation. Please remember this: too much science diminishes the weird atmosphere."

Concise Comments

Ernest H. Ormsbee, of Albany, New York, writes: "I predict that your readers are not going to accept Doctor Satan as particularly 'weird.' Master magicians are not necessarily weird, though master magic may be the stuff that weirdness is made of."

Russell Hogue, of St. Louis, writes: "Doctor Satan seems to be starting out good, and if he keeps it up should add many readers to the magazine. . . . I do not care one way or another about the covers, but I do think they should be made more spooky and mysterious."

John J. Rosecrans, of Sioux City, Iowa, writes: "The types of stories you publish in WT are all good. Individual tastes differ.

NEXT MONTH

The Great Brain of Kaldar

By Edmond Hamilton

IN THIS superb tale of distant Kaldar, a world of the gigantic blazing sun Antares, the author of "The Monster-God of Mamurth" returns to the type of story that first won him fame.

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Guy Detrick, of Big Prairie, Ohio, writes: "I believe your September cover is one of the most beautiful I've seen, although I do not believe my enthusiasm is shared by the fellow with his head sticking out of the bushes at the left of the picture. I do not believe he approves of nudes, to judge by his expression."

Louis Perrine, of Boston, writes: "Thanks for a really weird detective story of many thrills. I refer to Paul Ernst's fascinating story, *Doctor Satan*. I can hardly wait until the next issue brings more of his sinister adventures."

Alvin V. Pershing, of Bloomington, Indiana, writes: "I have been saving Brundage's covers. She is an asset to your magazine. I hope there is a beautiful young girl in each one. Nude girls are all right if Brundage makes them. . . . Please let us have more stories by Howard (about Conan), Northwest Smith stories by Moore, and the superb Clark Ashton Smith word pictures."

Charles L. Andrews, of Lowell, Michigan, writes: "Have read your magazine eight years, but am stopping if you continue the *Shambler from the Stars* and *Toad Idol* sort of thing."

A. Merritt, well-known author, writes from New York City: "Think the current number (September) one of the best you've put out. Glad also to see a naked lady again on the cover. I've been following that controversy with interest."

Earl Peirce, of Washington, D.C., writes: "The September issue of WT was good, as usual, but I thought Hamilton's reprint was its top piece."

One who signs himself (or herself) P. D. K. writes from New Haven, Connecticut: "Keep WEIRD TALES weird. We want gruesome, supernatural stories in a modern setting (Jules de Grandin, for instance). H. P. Lovecraft is best. Detective stories and super-science are just bromides."

Your Favorite Story

Readers, let us know which stories you like best in this issue. And if you dislike some of the stories, let us know which ones, and why you do not like them. Write a letter to the Eyrie, WEIRD TALES, or fill out the vote coupon on this page. As this issue goes to press, three stories are in a neck-and-neck race for most popular story in our September issue, as shown by your votes and letters. These are the eery story about Doctor Satan, *The Man Who Chained the Lightning*, by Paul Ernst; Robert Bloch's eldritch tale of horror, *The Shambler from the Stars;* and *Vulthoom*, by Clark Ashton Smith.

MY FAVORITE STORIES IN THE NOVEMBER WEIRD TALES ARE:

Story	Remarks
(1)----------	----------
(2)----------	----------
(3)----------	----------

I do not like the following stories:

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It will help us to know what kind of stories you want in WEIRD TALES if you will fill out this coupon and mail it to The Eyrie, Weird Tales, 840 N. Michigan Ave., Chicago, Ill.

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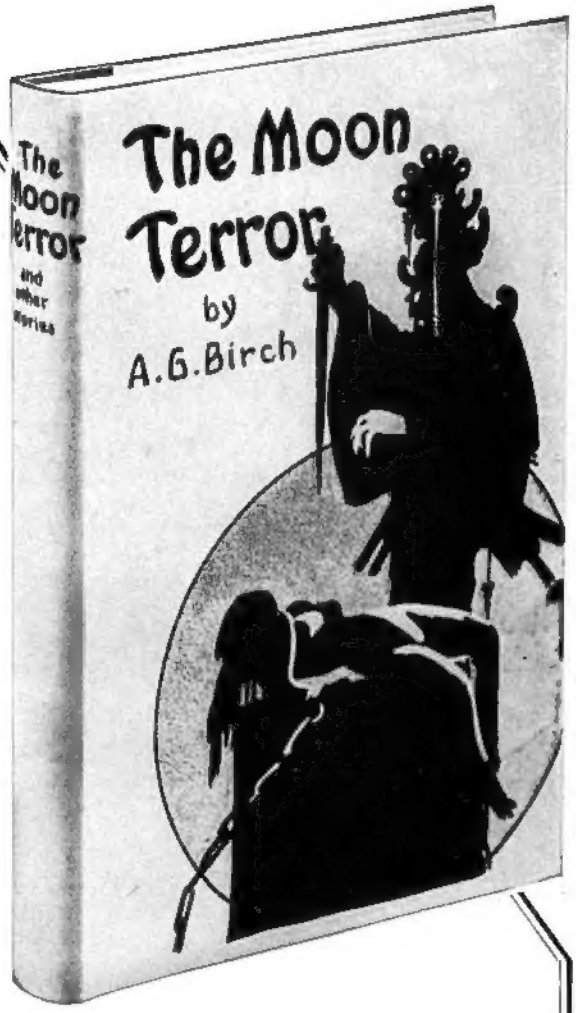

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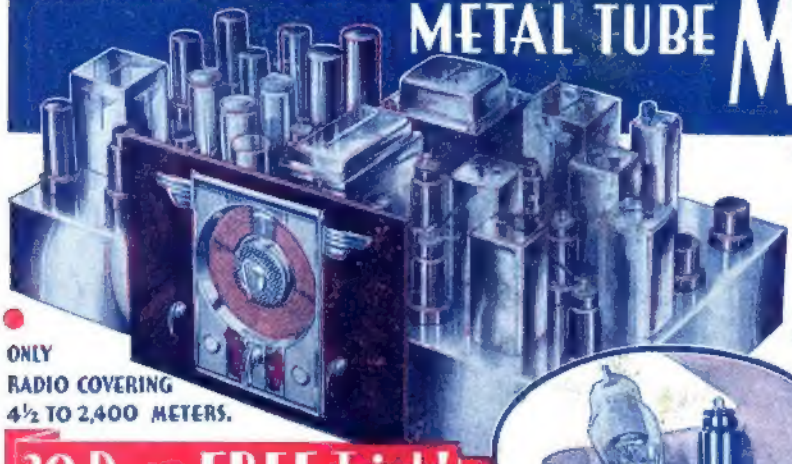

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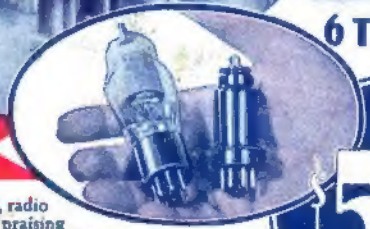

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